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## **The Problem of the Chorus in Contemporary Revivals of Greek Tragedy and Directorial Solutions in the Last Forty Years**

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King's College, London  
Department of Classics  
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**The Problem of the Chorus in Contemporary Revivals of Greek  
Tragedy and Directorial Solutions in the Last Forty Years**

**by**  
**Magdalena Zira**

A Dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
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### THESIS ABSTRACT

This thesis deals with how Western theatre directors have tried to solve the perceived ‘problem’ of the chorus in tragedy revivals in the period from the late 1970s to the present day. This period is marked by an increased tendency for artistic innovation, the result of many new aesthetic movements, and a cultural turning point: the firm re-establishment of a connection between sociopolitical issues and the art of theatre.

A guiding principle in the thesis is that, in order to create an aesthetic and ideological framework for the staging of the chorus, to make it necessary dramaturgically and aesthetically, we must take into account their original fifth-century function and cultural context. Thus I examine both the ancient evidence as well as significant contemporary directorial contributions in order to support the argument for the evolving nature of the choral form (and of tragedy in general) and of the importance of cultural and socio-political relevance for the success of the chorus: this is a form that inherently carries the potential to interact profoundly with cultural structures and idiosyncrasies and can, when used successfully, be theatrically and ideologically exciting in any contemporary re-contextualisation.

I propose that currently, in the context of a global economic and social crisis, there is a very perceptible shift in the aesthetics and politics of the staging of Greek drama, that has had a great impact on the staging of the chorus.

The evolution of tragedy revivals and the many and diverse contemporary incarnations of the chorus have consistently proven theatre’s social role for now and for the future: the Greek chorus is a vital presence in the dramatization of diachronic political and humanist issues. Far from being a problem, the contemporary Greek chorus emerges as a force for aesthetic innovation and socio-political relevance.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1. Thesis question

The question that this thesis attempts to answer falls into two parts, one historical (descriptive) and one related to a theory of practice (prescriptive): How have Western theatre directors tried to solve the perceived ‘problem’ of the role of the chorus in ancient Greek drama in the period from 1980 to 2016? And how can we use their experiences in the search for a meaningful audience experience of the chorus today? What works? What moves us?

Scholars have since the 1990s been documenting and analysing the extraordinary revival of performance of Greek drama traceable to the late 1960s. The chorus is an important part of the discussion, and scholars point out frequently the hugely problematic aspects of the chorus, as a theatrical form that is outdated and incomprehensible. This thesis, through a close look at contemporary incarnations of the choral form, will attempt to draw conclusions as to its theatrical and ideological potential. My goal is to examine whether its usefulness is obsolete within contemporary aesthetics and culture or whether it is still possible to overcome its apparent artificiality and strangeness, in a contemporary incarnation characterized by authenticity and organic dramaturgical integration.

The intellectual contexts in which I will be looking at this issue are the following: the rise of Reception Studies in Classics, and in particular the Performance Reception strand, which started to become established in 1996 when the Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama was founded; and the surge of Attic drama revivals world-wide from the 1970s onwards.

Since embarking on this thesis there has been renewed scholarly interest on the chorus in the context of Reception Studies, with some important recent publications that I will review in the doxography section of this chapter and will refer to throughout this thesis. Within this ongoing exciting academic discussion, my particular angle is marked by interdisciplinarity and an insistent focus on the issues of contemporary performance. It is defined by two factors. First of all, I write with the contemporary theatre practitioner in mind, even though my research is grounded in the classics. Despite the fact that academic focus on the chorus has opened up exciting, interdisciplinary discussion, and offers rich possibilities for research and analysis, especially retrospectively and historically, in practice I am convinced that the chorus remains a problem. What is the

chorus of the future on stage going to be? In this thesis, therefore, I have in mind an imaginary ‘target audience’ of directors and I draw from personal experience as practitioner, including some of my own experiences in the staging of Greek drama. Secondly, as my research evolved, the thesis focused increasingly on productions from Greece and Cyprus, my two native countries. Naturally a decisive factor was the fact that I had more first-hand experience of theatre productions in those countries, as a spectator and practitioner, as well as a mother-tongue-speaker’s insights into the cultural and socio-historical context. At the same time, I am particularly drawn to the case of Greece—and Cyprus—because they have some fascinating peculiarities in the history of Classical Reception, particularities that are nevertheless intrinsically linked with issues of context such as national and global politics. The case of Greece is always looked on as part of ‘Western’ Reception, but also with a separate history: one of the most internationally influential figures in the history of the Greek chorus’ revivals is a Greek, Karolos Koun. But Greece also has a complex, idiosyncratic relationship with Greek drama in which aesthetics intersect with politics, history, education and wider cultural issues. Recently the countries that have featured most prominently in the discussion of the chorus’ reception are Germany, the U.K. and the U.S. Many of the productions mentioned here come from these three countries, since scholarly focus and global influence have made the works coming from there widely visible and available. At the same time, I hope that my particular focus on the peculiarities of Greece, which does not share the same status as an exporter of culture, but nonetheless is particularly important in the Classics, will enrich the discussion.

## **2. Primary evidence**

### **i. Contemporary performance**

In my examination of the history of reception I will refer to productions from as early as the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but more emphasis will be given to productions from the last four decades, which are analyzed as case studies in Chapters 2, 4, 5 and 6. The period I will be focusing on is marked by theatrical innovation incorporating many new aesthetic movements, and a cultural turning point: this marks the firm re-establishment of a connection between sociopolitical issues and the art of theatre. This was a pivotal notion in Greek classical antiquity that has ebbed and flowed over the course of theatre history. But the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw a definite shift towards the rekindling of this dynamic connection between art and political life. Thus, inevitably,



much of the primary evidence of this thesis will have to do with aesthetic innovation and political/historical context.

Almost all my case studies date from the theatrical season 1980-1 onwards (one dates from 1979). Between 1980 and 1982, three major productions of the *Oresteia*, by Karolos Koun, Peter Stein and Peter Hall marked a turning point. These three productions not only instigated an unprecedented wave of Greek drama revivals in the decades that followed but marked the cusp in Classics, after which contemporary performance started to be considered a valid area of research.<sup>1</sup>

Much has been written on these three productions, and for the purposes of this chapter I will only briefly consider the three diverse, and influential, directorial approaches to the chorus, which was a focal point in each one. The Peter Stein version, a commentary on Germany's dealing with the collective trauma and memory of World War II, was marked by strong ensemble playing and a directorial vision combining multiple styles, periods and cultures.<sup>2</sup> It included a realistic depiction for the old men of *Agamemnon*, as carriers of memory from past wars, and a chorus of mourners in the *Choephoroi*, who lamented realistically but also played with the boundaries of theatricality by becoming an audience bearing witness to the murder of Clytemnestra by Orestes. The monstrous Eumenides were the least realistic of the three choruses, but a moment of powerful theatre came when, after the outcome of the trial they were ceremonially and symbolically bound and constricted, and then buried under the platform where the gods stood, effectively crushed by the new order—but also forever in its foundations.

In the Peter Hall version, Tony Harrison's translation was the protagonist.<sup>3</sup> In the published version of the script Harrison states in his preface: 'This is text written to be performed, a rhythmic libretto for masks, music and an all-male company.'<sup>4</sup> In Hall's logocentric approach that saw tragedy as verse drama, the recitation of the masked chorus is of utmost importance.<sup>5</sup> The percussive language of the translation included made-up words that echoed the Aeschylean imagery and vocabulary. Unison speech was avoided, and the clarity of the language of the choral odes was extraordinary and memorable. The objections to Hall's *Oresteia* mainly derive from what is seen as an unsuccessful use of

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<sup>1</sup> Macintosh (1997) 314.

<sup>2</sup> Chioles (1983) 22. See also Bierl (2005) discussed below, p.17.

<sup>3</sup> Chioles (1983) 16.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted by Chioles (1983) 16.

<sup>5</sup> Wiles (1997) finds Hall's logocentric approach distinctively British.

the mask and his misunderstanding of the nature of masked acting, which is a theatrical mode that is much closer to physical theatre than to a logocentric approach.<sup>6</sup>

Koun's *Oresteia* followed another aesthetic direction,<sup>7</sup> with a strong ritual dimension and Greek folk elements.<sup>8</sup> The chorus was the link between the spectators and the action, and a means to make this production political, as a reflection on current politics in Greece. Since this thesis puts particular emphasis on the evolution of the chorus in contemporary Greece, a longer discussion of Koun's *Oresteia* is included in Chapter 2.

A decade later, Ariane Mnouchkine produced her own, monumental version entitled *Les Atrides*,<sup>9</sup> a ten-hour spectacle which included *Iphigenia in Aulis* as a prelude and a strong feminist perspective.<sup>10</sup> Again the large singing and dancing chorus was of pivotal significance, in a production that remains an influential instance of intercultural theatre.<sup>11</sup>

In the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the interest in classical revivals does not seem to be subsiding.<sup>12</sup> In the UK, the theatre year 2015-2016 was characterized as the year of 'Grentrance' on the British stage,<sup>13</sup> due to the numerous productions of tragedy (as well as Homeric epic and Attic comedy), at exactly the same time as in Brussels Grexit was being discussed. In Greece today, Attic drama is a field undergoing a process of exciting developments and innovations, powered by, among other things, the current sociopolitical upheaval.<sup>14</sup>

The chorus continues to pose challenges to established aesthetics. A frequent solution is the reduction or elimination of the chorus even today, such as in one of the most high-profile adaptations of the *Oresteia* in recent years, the Almeida production

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<sup>6</sup> See for example Varakis (2008) 264-65.

<sup>7</sup> Aeschylus' *Oresteia* directed by Karolos Koun, translation T. Valtinos, music. M. Christodoulides, sets and costumes D. Fotopoulos, masks Stavros Bonatsos, Teatro Technis, 1982.

<sup>8</sup> On the use of Orthodox religious elements in Koun's *Oresteia* see for example Varakis (2008) 266-67.

<sup>9</sup> *Les Atrides* by Théâtre du Soleil was created over the years 1990-1992 and is a tetralogy based on Aeschylus' *Oresteia* preceded by Euripides' *Iphigeneia at Aulis*. All four plays were directed by Ariane Mnouchkine, music was composed by Jean-Jacques Lemêtre, set design by Guy-Claude François with sculptures by Erhard Stiefel, and costumes by Nathalie Thomas et Marie-Hélène Bouvet. *Iphigénie à Aulis* was translated by Jean Bollack, *Agamemnon* and *Les Choéphores* were translated by Ariane Mnouchkine and *Les Euménides* was translated by Hélène Cixous.

<sup>10</sup> See Decreus (2004).

<sup>11</sup> See Chapter 2 of this thesis, pp.33, 35.

<sup>12</sup> On the extraordinary performance history of the *Oresteia* in the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> see also Decreus (2004).

<sup>13</sup> Rebellato (2015). See also Laera (2015).

<sup>14</sup> See Chapter 6 of this thesis.

directed by Robert Icke.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless this is an exciting time to be studying the ‘problem’: productions such as the 2016 Edinburgh production of Aeschylus’ *Suppliant Women*,<sup>16</sup> a comment on the global refugee crisis with a 50-member citizen chorus, which was described as ‘the soul of the show’,<sup>17</sup> reveal the re-establishment of theatre’s political engagement through a clear directorial focus on the collective—both on stage and off. Powered by the same sociopolitical context, Austrian author and Nobel laureate Elfriede Jelinek wrote *Die Schutzbefohlenen* (*The Suppliants*) in 2013, a polyphonic play with references to the Aeschylean *Suppliants*, attacking Europe’s asylum policy. In both examples the choral ensemble is the main medium to express storyline and characterization as well as the work’s ideological foundation. This thesis will pose the question whether such instances as the Edinburgh *Suppliant Women* and Jelinek’s *The Suppliants* are indicative of an ephemeral trend powered by a specific historical context, or whether the Greek chorus has a future on the contemporary stage.

### **A note on the productions**

I was able to see live most of the productions discussed in this thesis. I was able to watch recordings of those I couldn’t see live, either on-line or at the Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama. I also used as evidence reviews and interviews with the artistic teams. Since among some of the issues discussed here are construction of identity and self-definition, the non-academic, often subjective and heated tone of the reviews I found particularly useful: I am not using them as evidence to reconstruct the performances, but rather to see the productions’ cultural impact and whether they clashed with established norms.

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<sup>15</sup> *Oresteia*, part of the Almeida Greeks Season, in a new version by Robert Icke, directed by Robert Icke, designed by Hildegard Bechtler, lighting by Natasha Chivers, sound by Tom Gibbons, video by Tim Reid, Almeida Theatre, London, 2015.

<sup>16</sup> Aeschylus’ *Suppliant Women*, in a new version by David Greig, directed by Ramyn Gray, composer and musical director John Browne, choreography by Sasha Milavic Davies, designed by Lizzie Clachan, lighting design by Charles Balfour, produced by the Royal Lyceum Theatre Edinburgh and Actors Touring Company. According to the theatre’s website ‘the *Suppliant Women* uses the techniques of ancient Greek theatre—recruiting and training the citizens of Edinburgh to create an extraordinary theatrical event.’ (information on the performance available at: <https://lyceum.org.uk/whats-on/production/the-suppliant-women>)

<sup>17</sup> Fisher (2016).

## ii. The ancient data.

A guiding principle in this thesis is that today it is hard to create an aesthetic and ideological framework for the staging of the chorus, that is, a reason why their presence is necessary on stage, emotionally, dramaturgically and aesthetically, unless we examine and analyze their original function with relation to the 5<sup>th</sup>-century audience. Always keeping in mind the contemporary theatre director, who has to find this lost connection to a necessary cultural framework, this thesis considers throughout, but especially in Chapter 3, the ancient data on the chorus from the texts themselves and from their context. Thus I will consider factors such as the dance and poetry culture in ancient Greece, the conditions of theatre production in the dramatic festivals of classical Athens, the significance of the chorus' ritual function, and the political parallels between the dramatic chorus and the new democratic polity. These elements are of course aspects of the 'problem' itself, but I will consider whether understanding them can lead to a more effective contemporary incarnation of the chorus. Another question which arises is whether these aspects have to be taken as inseparable pieces of the same puzzle or whether each dimension can enrich on its own a re-imagining of the chorus today.

## 3. Methodology

My method approaches historically experienced productions from three 'camera angles': (1) the scholarly perspectives outlined above under 'Contexts'; (2) my own personal experiences as a theatre practitioner, and (3) a broadly Cultural Materialist approach, which recognises the importance of the social and political contexts in which theatre texts and theatre performances are made and experienced. Recent scholarship attributes importance to historical moment and how it can be a decisive factor for the meaning and force of a production.<sup>18</sup> These three angles mutually complement and often overlap with one another: for example, as a practitioner, I am very conscious that the socio-political context of a production—the more pressing and specific the better—without being reductive, often provides inspiration and solutions. (see chapter 7 for an example for a proposed production of *Iphigenia in Aulis*.)

In recent years there has been some ground-breaking research on the impact of performance on the way plays are understood today but also on the way they were originally constructed. In 1977 Taplin's *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus* marked the

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<sup>18</sup> See especially Hall and Harrop (2010), Mee and Foley (2011).

beginning of a new era in scholarship, the shift from the philological approach to the study of Attic drama as theatre. This new approach focussed on the practical details of the performance as well as on the performance's cultural context, as inseparable from the audience's experience of the play. In 2000 the Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama put forth its first publication, *Medea in Performance*, looking at the international performance history of Euripides' most famous play and marking a turning point in respect of the nature of Classical Reception Studies. Scholars, while continuing to explore the conditions of the original performance, have also been focusing on the impact of contemporary theatrical revivals on our understanding of the genre. To mention only a few important editions, the volume *Dionysus Since 69: Greek Tragedy at the Dawn of the Third Millennium*<sup>19</sup> examines classical revivals from the late 1960s onwards in various contexts such as politics, gender conflict, aesthetic developments and contemporary intellectual theories and movements; *Antigone on the Contemporary World Stage*<sup>20</sup> focuses on culturally specific readings of *Antigone* world-wide; *Crossroads in the Black Aegean: Oedipus, Antigone, and Dramas of the African diaspora*<sup>21</sup> considers adaptations of these two plays influenced by the African experience in a postcolonial context.

The wealth of scholarship on contemporary theatrical revivals led to a need for a theory for classical reception. The volume *Theorizing Performance: Greek Drama, Cultural History and Critical Practice*<sup>22</sup> addresses this need, putting forth various methodologies. This thesis follows Edith Hall's model, analysed in Chapter 2 of said volume, as a bidirectional relationship between the original and its reception. On the one hand Hall stresses that our appreciation of the texts of classical drama 'can be redefined by excavating their afterlife, what they have "meant" in cultures and epochs other than those which originally produced them'.<sup>23</sup> This is the historical Materialist approach focusing on the relationship between cultural phenomena and sociopolitical issues.<sup>24</sup> Vidal-Naquet's historical relativism, 'which locates Greek tragedy's power to transcend history in its susceptibility to different interpretations',<sup>25</sup> provides further support for Hall's methodology. At the same time, Hall considers the cultural impact of the classical

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<sup>19</sup> Hall, Macintosh and Wrigley (2004).

<sup>20</sup> Mee and Foley (2011).

<sup>21</sup> Goff and Simpson (2007).

<sup>22</sup> Hall and Harrop (2010).

<sup>23</sup> Hall (2010) 12. See also Martindale (1993) 7.

<sup>24</sup> Hall (2010) 13. On the Historical Materialist approach see also Hall and Macintosh (2005).

<sup>25</sup> Hall (2010) 14.

text itself on future generations, stressing the importance of Vernant's 'dialectical method', according to which '...all significant artworks actively condition the shapes taken by future artworks, whether the conditioning takes the form of emulation, modification or rejection'.<sup>26</sup> Other aspects, disciplines and contexts of the study of performance laid out in the same chapter for their importance for our understanding of classical texts are also implicit in my approach, which is informed by my work as a theatre practitioner. These include the significance of the somatic quality of theatre, which means that theatre offers 'special evidence of a society's approach to such basic aspects of human experience as the body, gender, sexual desire, injury, and suffering';<sup>27</sup> identification, which is a twin process of substitution, for the actor playing the role but also for the spectator identifying with that role, and as such provides evidence, through theatre, for a society's historic search for identity;<sup>28</sup> social history-related issues such as the activation of collective identity through theatre, the power of tradition and social context, which are all especially pertinent in a discussion of the chorus;<sup>29</sup> and finally, a consideration of the political potency of Greek tragedy that can be activated in any historical context, a theme I will return to frequently in this thesis. This diachronic political relevance is expressed by Hall as the '...tension between the democratic form of ancient drama and its often conservative content. This tension gives the plays an ideological complexity, a dialogism, that partly explains their perennial appeal'.<sup>30</sup>

Thus, the methodological model in this thesis is in effect a multidisciplinary approach, summarized by Hall and Harrop in their introduction as follows:

no single paradigm or model can ever be sufficient to the complicated task of analyzing performance, especially of 'classic' texts, and that different problems are susceptible to unravelling by different conceptual means. We should not be afraid to order our theory eclectically 'à la carte'.<sup>31</sup>

In the same volume, Zachary Dunbar argues in favour of multi-disciplinarity in the study of the performance history and practice of Greek drama, especially in the case of the chorus.<sup>32</sup> Dunbar comments that, in the last decades, influential contemporary revivals of

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<sup>26</sup> Vernant (1988: 237-47) quoted in Hall (2010) 14.

<sup>27</sup> Hall (2010) 16.

<sup>28</sup> Hall (2010) 17.

<sup>29</sup> Hall (2010) 19.

<sup>30</sup> Hall (2010) 26.

<sup>31</sup> Hall and Harrop (2010) 4.

<sup>32</sup> Dunbar (2010) 85-86.

tragedy from around the world have shown that the discourses of anthropology, film studies, gender studies and postmodern theatre are relevant for reception studies on the chorus.<sup>33</sup> He also supports a bidirectional thinking in Reception Studies that enriches our knowledge of classical civilization:

Based on the frequency and intensity of multiple approaches to Greek drama, multidisciplinary is a condition of analysis and a criterion of research particularly suited to understanding why classical Greek drama happened in fifth century BCE Athens, and why we are still concerned about it in the modern era.<sup>34</sup>

#### **4. Doxography**

##### **i. Ancient performance**

Some important volumes that deal with ancient performance of Attic drama that I found particularly useful include *Performance in Greek and Roman theatre*,<sup>35</sup> which attempts to reconstruct as closely as possible the conditions of ancient performance, using historical, archaeological and textual evidence. This volume looks at performance space and its uses; the actors; the conventions and techniques of performance such as masks; and finally the chorus, which the authors characterize as ‘at once the most emblematic part of Greek drama and the element that causes the greatest perplexity to modern theatre practitioners staging Greek plays.’<sup>36</sup> In relation to the staging of the chorus, the authors emphasize the civic context of the festival, the inclusive nature of the open-air ancient theatre, and the absence of a real boundary between chorus and spectators—these are all elements of the geography of the theatre and the nature of the festival that create a community comprising of spectators and chorus.<sup>37</sup> *The Athenian Institution of the Khoregia: the Chorus, the City and the Stage*<sup>38</sup> is a valuable contribution to the study of the chorus’ civic context and I will refer to it closely, especially in chapters 3 and 5 of this thesis in the context of my investigation of the political nature of the chorus. *Poetry into Drama: Early Tragedy and the Greek Poetic Tradition*<sup>39</sup> provided much evidence on

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<sup>33</sup> Dunbar (2010) 86.

<sup>34</sup> Dunbar (2010) 86.

<sup>35</sup> Harrison and Liapis (2013).

<sup>36</sup> Liapis, Panayiotakis and Harrison (2013) 9-10.

<sup>37</sup> See Chapter 3 of this thesis, p.82.

<sup>38</sup> Wilson (2003).

<sup>39</sup> Herington (1985).

the vibrant choral culture of ancient Greece and on the origins of the Athenian art form of tragedy within that culture. *Greek Tragedy: Suffering under the Sun*<sup>40</sup> vividly recreated the experience of attending the dramatic festival of Athens, thus illuminating the dynamic created between the audience and the chorus.

## ii. Reception Studies

In this section I review a selection of the specialist bibliography on the chorus in contemporary performance of Greek drama. The bibliography includes formulations of the ‘problem’ of the chorus, reflections on the original chorus’ form, content and context, and categorizations of current directorial trends that take into consideration contemporary cultural context. Thus the doxography follows a movement from the broader picture to more specific issues.

Herman Altena’s<sup>41</sup> hypothesis on the reasons behind the wave of Attic drama revivals in recent decades puts the chorus firmly in the centre of the discussion, both as a problem but also as a crucial part of the ideological and aesthetic arsenal of Greek tragedy, even on the contemporary stage. Among the ‘strange elements’ in tragedy that ‘reveal an enormous gap between the [directors’] culture and the remote fifth-century Athenian society’<sup>42</sup>, which include high poetry and paucity of on-stage action, the chorus stands out in this article as particularly problematic.<sup>43</sup> Altena’s focus on the contemporary practitioner faced with this ancient genre, and in particular on the issue of relevance vs alterity, is also one of the central points in the discussion in the current thesis. Altena argues that the main reasons behind tragedy’s appeal to directors are the presence of myth in the text and plot, the universality of its themes and finally its formal variety. These are all in my opinion elements which are closely related to the form, content and dramatic identity of the chorus and as such provide starting points for fruitful ‘solutions’ to the problem. Specifically, the universal and diachronic sociopolitical concerns of the plays, which have made tragedy popular with 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-century politically engaged directors and which are expressed through focus on the collective in the *mise-en-scène*, are dealt with in detail in Chapter 5 of this thesis. Altena’s emphasis on the suitability of tragedy for experimentation in theatrical modes of expression is also important in my argument.

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<sup>40</sup> Hall (2010).

<sup>41</sup> Altena (2005).

<sup>42</sup> Altena (2005) 472.

<sup>43</sup> Altena (2005) 474.



The relationship between tragedy and the theatrical avant-garde is considered throughout but in Chapter 6 in particular, in which I examine very recent approaches which are reflecting a variety of contemporary theatre movements in the aesthetics of the representation of the chorus, especially in Greece. Like many other scholars Altena is of the opinion that despite the desire for experimentation, collaboration with other arts, and exploration of theatrical boundaries, the treatment of the chorus is usually unsuccessful.

Helene Foley's thorough study on the chorus on the modern stage<sup>44</sup> also has as a starting point the pervasive awkwardness surrounding the full chorus in contemporary productions, evidenced by the reduction in many contemporary performances of the chorus to one to three actors, who neither sing nor dance. This article includes an analysis of the problem as well as a long list of examples of successful directorial solutions, each corresponding to different aspects of the chorus' theatrical alterity. Foley notes that outside of modern Greece we rarely see a large chorus in recent years, and even more rarely a dancing-and-singing chorus, and attributes this to the audiences' awkwardness towards a form that appears painfully intrusive.

Foley notes that this difficulty with the combination of text with full-scale song and dance in the case of the Greek chorus is surprising, given that in opera more and more interdisciplinary collaborations take place, such as between dancers and singers, while dance theatre is a form that has for years experimented with the combination of text, choreography and music. However, I would argue that, considering the fundamental characteristics of actor training in the West, the problem with the integration of song and dance into Greek tragedy is not surprising at all. The strong naturalist acting tradition and the lasting influence of realism in Western theatre from the beginning of modernity has been determining both audience expectations and actors' range and technique. In our modern Western society, in contrast to Ancient Greece, there is a clear distinction among disciplines and strict specialization, creating certain technical expectations from dancers, singers and actors that don't allow for much inter-connectedness between genres. For example, serious drama demands a logocentric technique acquired through training that tends to put singing and dancing in a secondary position in drama schools. The so-called 'triple threat' actors, who can act, sing and dance, are more commonly employed in Musical Theatre and are trained in the Musical Theatre aesthetic. On the other hand, opera has its own technical requirements. The individual actor who can freely move between

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<sup>44</sup> Foley (2007).

the genres of musical theatre, opera, dance and serious drama is a rare phenomenon. In terms of aesthetics and genre, in chapter 2 of this thesis I will go into more detail on the connotations created by a dancing and singing group in our contemporary culture that are part of the problem of the reception of the chorus. As Foley mentions later on, the fact that tragedy, musical and opera all have choruses creates perhaps more problems than solutions, since the audience's expectations from each genre are different.

Foley is on point when she discusses the financial side of the problem of the staging a full chorus today.<sup>45</sup> A long rehearsal period with twelve to fifteen actors, the costume budget, the voice and movement training, the choreography, the composer's fee, the musical director, can all lead to astronomical costs in today's theatre production.

Foley then examines whether fundamental characteristics of the chorus, such as its religious dimension, its collective voice, the intricate poetry and the emphasis on myth in the choral passages, can be recreated in a contemporary revival. She also offers suggestions of potential contexts and mentioning specific productions that engaged with these aspects of the choral form. Foley's overview of the great diversity in directorial responses is extremely useful, and so is her analysis of the reasons why the chorus is so problematic in Western drama. This thesis is also structured around directorial solutions to specific aspects of the problem. However, my approach is less focused on recreating aspects of the original choral *form*, such as large numbers, singing and dancing, and more on the significance of understanding and trying to recreate the particular *effect*—emotional, spiritual, political, ideological—that the chorus may have had on its original audience. I should also remark that one crucial difference between my point of view and Foley's is related to the chorus in Modern Greek productions, which she considers a successful contemporary paradigm. Throughout this thesis I examine the important contribution of directors from Greece and Cyprus in the history of Western reception of tragedy, but, particularly in Chapter 6, I examine why the typical modern Greek dancing and singing chorus of tragedy is no longer a viable option for many theatre artists.

In a chapter analyzing the contemporary performance history of *Agamemnon*, a play he considers extremely influential in the history of modern tragic revivals, Anton Bierl includes a close look at the problem of the chorus in European tragic revivals.<sup>46</sup> Bierl's point of view is that rather than being a problem, the chorus can be a stimulus to

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<sup>45</sup> The financial aspect of the problem of the chorus and its sociopolitical and ideological ramifications will be the main focus of Chapter 6 of this thesis.

<sup>46</sup> Bierl (2005).

the finding of practical solutions. His study invites reflection on the evolving needs and aesthetics of contemporary theatre. Rather than a hurdle to a prevailing realistic aesthetic, the chorus can have multiple functions in non-mainstream theatre which challenges dramatic conventions and explores` postmodern approaches to acting and directing.

Bierl's investigation of the form's modern incarnations is focused mostly on German productions. In listing the solutions to the chorus by modern directors throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, he also takes into consideration a loose chronology. In his overview he mentions diverse approaches as the mass choruses of Max Reinhardt that aim to re-establish the form's public dynamic, Gustav Rudolf Sellner's static ceremonial choruses, with unison speech, and experiments with individual voices; German regietheater deconstructed and sometimes comic choruses in the 1970s, Peter Stein's psychological interpretation and naturalistic staging, Hanganther Heyme's group recitations in a psalmodic mode, Peter Sellars' invisible acoustic participants and finally Ariane Mnouchkine's sensational singing and dancing chorus. As for the chorus of *Agamemnon* in particular Bierl's hypothesis is that in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century directorial approaches went from what he calls static solemnity to more developed and multi-faceted approaches in performance that included elements from traditional cultures, ritual and dance.

Aside from presenting the great diversity and complexity of approaches to the chorus available to directors, Bierl's stated goal in this overview is to show the interconnectedness between the presentation of the chorus and the historical and intellectual context. At the same time, this consideration of context and chronology, focusing frequently on productions that also interact with each other, also helps us realize the broadening of theatrical vocabulary and the innovation inspired by the engagement with the chorus on the contemporary stage, even in the field of new writing.

### **iii. Recent specialized bibliography on the chorus**

When I started writing the thesis, there were no studies that focused exclusively on the reception of the chorus. But in recent years two important edited volumes looking at the chorus and choreia in antiquity and in its contemporary reception have contributed to scholarship on this subject. The first, *Choruses Ancient and Modern*<sup>47</sup> is perhaps the most comprehensive recent volume on the reception of the chorus, whose programmatic

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<sup>47</sup> Billings, Budelmann and Macintosh (2013).

statement, in a semantically significant departure from the idea of the chorus as a problem, is to examine the *allure* of the ancient chorus in modernity. The authors state that the volume does not confine itself to the dramatic chorus, while stressing that particular chorus' lasting influence for our modern view of choruses in general. The majority of the chapters are in fact focused on the tragic chorus and its contemporary incarnations. The volume claims to respond to recent developments in theatre practice, also crucial to my thesis, that have shown that practitioners have increasingly come to value the chorus and the chorus/ensemble as a compelling medium of presentation. The reasons behind this choral renaissance are identified as the increasing exposure to non-Western theatre traditions (dealt with mostly in Chapter 4 of this thesis), the emergence of influential non-hierarchical companies (dealt with in Chapters 5 and 6 of this thesis), and finally research in cognitive science shedding new light on the relationship between spectator and performer, by proving that 'there can be no viewing without some degree of participation.'<sup>48</sup> This volume relies on expertise from various disciplines and examines a variety of contexts for the chorus' reception thus the result is marked with diversity and variety. On the other hand, the unifying goal or cumulative argument of the volume is less clear.

The beginning of modernity is a focal point and the importance of 19<sup>th</sup>-century thought, especially from Germany, for our contemporary notions of the chorus is given much emphasis, in chapters by Simon Goldhill, Constanze Güthenke, Joshua Billings and Edith Hall. In Chapter 2 of this thesis I also place special emphasis on 19<sup>th</sup> century notions about the chorus that have shaped how we see it today. The interest of 20<sup>th</sup>-century scholarship in anthropology and how this in turn affected theatrical depictions of the chorus, especially with regard to dance, is the focus of a chapter by Ian Rutherford. The volume mostly intersects with my thesis in considering contemporary creative responses inspired by the chorus, in which the dramatic chorus has a prominent place. Erika Fischer-Lichte considers approaches to the chorus in the German-speaking world. Helen Eastman considers contemporary British choral theatre, influenced by the methods of Jacques Lecoq. In chapter 5 of this thesis I will interact more closely with Martin Revermann's chapter on the choruses of Brecht and Edith Hall's chapter on the chorus' political potential.

Since this thesis does not include a chapter devoted specifically to dance, but

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<sup>48</sup> Billings, Budelmann and Macintosh (2013) 7.

considers dance a big part of the problem of the chorus, I here look at Fiona Macintosh's observations on the subject from this volume. In a chapter focusing on the particularly problematic element of choral dance, Macintosh argues that the *corps de ballet* should be a big part of the discussion of the reception of the ancient chorus. She focuses on the beginning of modernity, during which time considerations of class and community shaped audience perceptions and performance history. She views the *corps de ballet* in this sociopolitical context, and explains its lasting cultural influence in ways that intersect with the tragic chorus' reception.

[...]the *corps de ballet* embodies power, especially power of the collective; and in the early nineteenth century, it embodied the power of female collectivities at a time when the principal ballerina was literally bathed in the newly invented stage gas-lighting.<sup>49</sup>

Macintosh's investigation sheds light on the cultural reasons why the dancing and singing chorus of antiquity was, and still is, a problematic notion for modern Europeans: as perceptions of dance in modernity evolved, they impacted the performance history of the tragic chorus.

Specifically, Macintosh notes that, by the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, dance was considered of low moral status, and consequently was deemed incompatible with the serious art form of tragedy. She gives the characteristic example of the production of Mendelssohn's *Antigone*, which transferred from Paris to London in 1845. In London, the ballet inserted to accompany the ode to Dionysus was met with derision, while the theatre critic George Henry Lewes, in reaction to this performance, published an article in *The Classical Museum* in which he went to great lengths to prove through academic research that there was 'no dancing whatsoever in the Greek tragic chorus', since 'dancing is contrary to all notions of tragedy'.<sup>50</sup> On the other hand, Macintosh goes back to a positive analogy in the revolutionary choruses of 18<sup>th</sup>-century France who, in many ways were the precursors of the *corps de ballet*, had dynamic relevance in the social context and indeed have many similarities with the Greek chorus. In conclusion she points out that our understanding of the early 19<sup>th</sup>-century *corps de ballet* as an example of 'just how effectively a dancing chorus can provide the spinal column, and thus the nerve centre, of

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<sup>49</sup> Macintosh (2014) 433.

<sup>50</sup> Lewes quoted in Macintosh (2014) 437.

the action’<sup>51</sup> can help us fully appreciate the meaning of dance in the original Greek chorus.

Felix Budelmann’s observations I also find helpful. He examines a fundamental binary of Western thinking with relation to the chorus: that is, aesthetics versus social function. He notes that the chorus in modernity is viewed in terms of this binary, appreciated either for its high artistic value or for its function and impact within a society. He asks how this binary can be examined through applying it to the ancient chorus too, and argues for the compatibility and interweaving of two perspectives. Budelmann’s analysis compliments my own argument because it may lead us to consider applying the idea of interweaving the two perspectives to the choruses of today. In this time of extreme specialization, separation of disciplines and commercialization of art, which is considered above all a high-end product with the main purpose of providing entertainment and high quality spectacle, the tragic chorus can have a renewed role. It can be an element that opens up the possibility of a more socially engaged, less formalist approach to performance, which manages to combine high aesthetics with a functional role, which could be, for example, to reactivate the spectators’ political engagement. This kind of theatre would potentially be less commercial but at the same time more in tune with the social needs of a wider spectrum of people. Whether the tragic chorus has the ability to activate this kind of theatre is one of the implied questions in my current investigation.

Erika Fischer-Lichte’s chapter on choric theatre puts my discussion of contemporary political choral experiments in context, with emphasis on German-speaking work. Fischer-Lichte identifies key historical moments in modernity at which choric theatre enjoyed a revival, and examines four productions as representative of each one: Max Reinhardt’s productions of *Oedipus Rex* (1910) and *The Oresteia* (1911), representative of a kind of theatre whose aim was community building, as societal bonds were felt to be disintegrating due to industrialization; Einar Schlee’s *The Mothers* (1986), based on Euripides’ *Suppliant Women* and Aeschylus’ *Seven against Thebes*, again examining the relationship between the individual and the community, in late industrial and post-industrial societies; and Theatercombinat’s *The Persians*, first presented in Geneva in 2006, as a theatrical exploration of participatory democracy. Here the marginalized amateurs of the chorus were not migrants or asylum seekers, as in Schlee’s *The Mothers*, but the citizens of a contemporary Western democratic state that have been

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<sup>51</sup> Macintosh (2014) 455.

disenfranchised by the corruption of representative democracy. Fisher-Lichte's characterizes the choral community of Theatercombinat's *Persians* as 'a kind of swarm, a self-organizing collective that did not exert any pressure on its members and enabled everybody to include or exclude themselves.'<sup>52</sup> Chapter 5 of this thesis includes an in-depth analysis of the methods of Theatercombinat for the creation of their own particular form of choric theatre, examined over several of their productions of Greek tragedy, including the *Persians*.

Again with a great diversity in focus and methodology, the volume *Choral Mediations in Greek tragedy*<sup>53</sup> argues for the chorus' central role in tragedy, due to its ability to mediate between tragedy's multiple aspects, themes, contexts and influences. The volume encompasses a wide range of approaches and the final sections of chapters, by Joshua Billings, Fiona Macintosh and Peter Meineck, are focused on the chorus' reception on the modern stage.

Meineck's chapter in particular intersects with this thesis, writing on contemporary directors whose work spans the years 1968-2009 and who have successfully engaged with the chorus by harnessing some of its original dynamic and function. These are Richard Schechner, Mark Adamo, Anne Bogart, and Will Power. The discussion touches on the chorus' spatial importance, the importance of the presence of the chorus in the space of the ancient theatre, of the physical presence of the bodies, the significance of gestures and the use of masks. The chapter includes interviews with contemporary directors and analysis of their work on the chorus. Meineck argues that these directors have 'all found contemporary methods to create a relationship between their audiences and ancient material where the lines between what is old and new, time and place and cultural points of reference are constantly blurred, crossed and even broken.'<sup>54</sup> His paper, looking at the volume's thesis of choral mediation in its practical application, in contemporary performance, makes one of the most compelling arguments for the centrality of the chorus in tragedy.

## 5. Conclusion and synopsis of chapters

This thesis was inspired by the view of its author—a practitioner—of a problematic element in Greek tragedy revivals. At the same time, it was fueled by a context of global

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<sup>52</sup> Fischer-Lichte (2013) 361.

<sup>53</sup> Gagné and Hopman (2013).

<sup>54</sup> Meineck (2013) 383.

economic and social crisis, within which theatre artists find themselves once again responding by focusing on issues of community-building and social relevance. Current scholarship on the chorus has been recently enriched, and this thesis hopes to add to this growing interest by focusing on choral experiments and social context in Greek-speaking countries.

**Chapter 2**, beginning with widespread contemporary notions from popular culture, lays out the problems in revivals of the Greek tragic chorus from the beginning of modernity onwards. The roots of today's awkwardness and suspicious attitude towards this theatrical form are investigated, their origins found in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the context of that era's great socio-political upheavals. The problem is then broken down into sub-categories corresponding to structural, ideological and culturally-related idiosyncrasies: the collective voice, the element of dance and the context of a dance culture, the connection to ritual and the mythical content.

**Chapter 3** attempts to map the original cultural, aesthetic and political context of the Greek chorus, and examine how it influenced this form's theatrical dynamic and resonance with the audience, in the hope that some insights can be gained towards creating the conditions for a necessary and dynamic choral collective today.

**Chapters 4, 5 and 6** each deals with one aspect of the Greek chorus as laid out in the 'problems' chapter, and includes an analysis of a production or director who has offered a solution to each particular dimension of chorality. The aspects chosen were ritual, politics and finally the economic factor, which of course has ideological ramifications, against the backdrop of the current global economic crisis. I chose these aspects of the chorus' character and context, putting aside a purely aesthetic approach that would look at contemporary approaches to musical composition and choreography, since analysis of music and movement always comes up with relation to ritual, culturally specific or even highly political productions. Secondly, I feel that the examination of issues of form will not be helpful unless they are examined together with the ideological foundation behind any artistic choice. Musical and choreographic styles can change subject to aesthetic trends or a particular creator's artistic trajectory, whereas this thesis aims to discover some unalterable principles that transcend time and place and are at the basis of the chorus' dynamic.

**Chapter 4** will deal with the ritual and religious dimension of the problem and examines whether it can be reproduced successfully today. It will refer to productions and directors who attempted to use ritual in Greek tragedy revivals, in the following political



and aesthetic contexts: intercultural theatre, the rise of ritual theatre in the 60s and 70s, post-colonial culturally-specific adaptations of tragedy and re-contextualisations influenced by Christian dogma. The chapter concludes with an in-depth analysis of a production from 1979, Euripides' *Suppliants* directed by Nicos Charalambous and produced by the Cyprus Theatre Organisation.

**Chapter 5** deals with the political dimension of the Greek chorus. After a brief discussion of some of the relevant ancient evidence, with special emphasis on choral identity and agency, a history of the theatrical staging of the collective (not exclusively the Greek chorus) in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is attempted, in the context of that century's various avant-garde movements and the corresponding historical-political turning points. These influential movements and the work of artists such as Brecht and Piscator have shaped contemporary political theatre and attitudes towards the collective on stage. Thus they form the background and foundation of the work of many contemporary artists, including Claudia Bosse, whose work on Greek drama with her Vienna-based company Theatercombinat is the main case study of this chapter. This chapter asks whether the Greek chorus' original complex political dynamic can ever be reproduced in a revival today.

While my argument developed and the global financial crisis took its toll on arts budgets worldwide, the economic aspect of making socially relevant, non-commercial, 'difficult' theatre that included a large chorus became a pressing matter to consider. I know first-hand the complicated relationship between theatre and money from personal experience as a practitioner. If I am to argue in favour of a strong chorus in contemporary performance, I have to face the economic reality of the issue. **Chapter 6** responds to what I see as a major turning point in revivals of Greek drama in Greece, a country that comes up frequently in this thesis due to its long and complex contemporary tradition of Attic drama revivals, but which also is an ideal case study for the impact of the economic crisis on theatre production. The crisis has had a particularly disastrous effect on Greece, combined with the resulting social upheavals and the refugee crisis. As regards the 'problem' of the chorus, this chapter deals with the economic aspect, and concurrent ethical conundrums, of Attic drama productions in depression Greece, as well as the chorus' ideological content in this turbulent time.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE PROBLEM OF THE CHORUS

#### 1. Introduction: Popular Notions

Woody Allen's 1995 film *Mighty Aphrodite*, a romantic comedy inspired by the myth of Pygmalion, famously features a Greek chorus, narrating the story and commenting throughout.<sup>55</sup> The film starts with Greek rembetiko music, a solo bouzouki, as the 'Greek Chorus' comes on, to stand and perform among ancient ruins. They are wearing huge half-masks that border on the comical and 'typical' costumes of tragedy. They recite in unison, move in unison, make stylized gestures while they speak in a declamatory style. If it wasn't immediately clear (at least from the rembetiko soundtrack) that they are a comic device, it becomes obvious when they start interacting with other characters. For example, when the character of Woody Allen meets the chorus leader, who is trying to dissuade him from going through the adoption files, he retorts by saying: 'That's why you will always be a chorus member, because you don't do anything. I act, I take action.' Allen uses such well-known notions and stereotypes humorously and successfully throughout. In fact, in this popular American comedy we can identify a number of 'image problems' and misleading stereotypes surrounding the chorus, that form the complex challenge facing the contemporary Western director of Greek tragedy.

In our globalized world, where boundaries between popular and 'high-brow' cultural production are increasingly flexible, America's global culture, a cornerstone of which is its film industry, is fundamentally important in shaping shared cultural notions and, as a result, theatre audience perceptions.

The way in which this formal element of Greek drama now exists in collective cultural memory in the West is exemplified in a similar way in the recent Broadway musical *Spiderman: Turn off the Dark*,<sup>56</sup> which in its first version included a 'geek chorus'. An article in the New York Times by Patrick Healey, published on March 24, 2011, reporting on the reasons why the producers, after relieving the director, Julie

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<sup>55</sup> *Mighty Aphrodite*, (Sweetland Films, Magnolia Pictures, Miramax Films), directed by Woody Allen, USA 1995. The film can be viewed at the Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama in Oxford.

<sup>56</sup> *Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark*, music and lyrics by Bono and The Edge, book by Julie Taymor, Glen Berger, Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa, 2011, Foxwoods' Theatre, New York.

Taymor, of her duties, decided to drop this element of the production, is extremely telling about popular notions of the chorus.

Ms. Taymor invented the geeks — a group of comic-book devotees who make up the plot of the musical as it unfolds — as a device to cover complicated scenery changes. In the current Broadway production, they stand in front of a curtain that hides massive moving set pieces. She also saw them as a way to speed through plot exposition, especially about her other chief creation, the spider villainess Arachne, whose story line and function in the musical have nevertheless proved confusing to many audience members.<sup>57</sup>

Julie Taymor, who is also one of the script writers for *Turn Off the Dark*, is an internationally renowned director who is known for her strong background in the performing arts of traditional cultures and bold adaptations of Shakespeare. I find it then extremely intriguing that her version of the chorus, even if it is a ‘geek’ chorus, is ‘a device to cover scene changes’ and a way for quicker plot exposition. The new creative team announced that they will be cutting the geek chorus because the writers have found ‘ways to execute the scenery changes and provide the plot exposition without the geeks.’<sup>58</sup>

I started with two examples from popular film and popular theatre, and that isn’t to say there isn’t a plethora of sophisticated interpretations of the Greek chorus by truly avant-garde directors in contemporary theatre, who have tried to tackle its form, content and dramatic identity in exciting ways, and which I will be referring to throughout this thesis. These interpretations of Greek drama in recent years are often grounded in theory and at the forefront of theatrical innovation, as recent publications in Reception Studies have shown.<sup>59</sup> But I chose to focus on these two examples from mass culture to show what the theatre director in the West is up against, when dealing with ‘the problem of the chorus’, with regard to audience preconceptions. In the context of this thesis, which uses a cultural materialist approach, such influential elements of our cultural context matter greatly, and such high-profile examples of Classical Reception cannot be overlooked.

We have all without a doubt experienced awkwardness surrounding the staging of the chorus, whether as audience members or practitioners. In contemporary Western

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<sup>57</sup> Healey (2011).

<sup>58</sup> Healey (2011).

<sup>59</sup> See for example Hall, Macintosh and Wrigley (2004), Hall and Harrop (2010).

theatre the chorus seems alien, a relic, cumbersome to the production, and thus it is very often cut or massively reduced. Simon Goldhill summarizes these problematic notions, as what he calls an ‘image problem’ of a group ‘intoning banalities with profound expressions’, who, if they sing and dance, they look like an American musical<sup>60</sup>-- exactly the chorus of *Mighty Aphrodite*.

In the following paragraphs I will attempt to identify, separate and explain the several aspects of the problem of the chorus in contemporary productions. Today we have a global proliferation of Greek drama, in the open air, closed spaces, in many languages, in festivals, in traditional theatres, and in shows of every kind. This is a testament to its power and resilience. Yet despite the ubiquity of Greek drama, the chorus, apparently, is still considered a ‘problem’. I will tackle my exploration of this notion under the following headings: the roots of the problem at the beginning of Modernity, the issue of collective identity, the element of dance, the importance of ritual, mythical authority and the discrepancy with naturalism. In these sections I will draw on a range of documented productions, most of which have been widely discussed in the field of Classical Reception over the last two decades. The common focus throughout will be on the chasm between the cultural references of the original audience and those of our contemporaries. At times the issues seem so firmly interconnected that listing them separately may appear forced and, at times, repetitive. However, the reason I feel such a categorization is necessary is that today the several disciplines encompassed in theatre and the performance arts, such as language, music, dance, singing, acting and design, are studied and applied separately. Furthermore, the issues forming the cultural context of theatrical productions, such as aesthetics, religion, politics, civic life, and the social importance of artistic expression, are also much more independent and separately observable today, than in classical antiquity.

In this chapter I will also look closely at a contemporary example of special interest: the modern day tradition of staging Greek drama in Greece and Cyprus. Greeks and Cypriots often feel that they are at an advantage in our treatment of the chorus. There seems to be no awkwardness here, but a tradition of great achievements, since the beginning of the history of well-funded, regular revivals of Greek drama that started in the 1940s and were supported by the political establishment. Audience members and actors in Greece and Cyprus have a strong perception of what the chorus is, and seldom

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<sup>60</sup> Goldhill (2007) 45.

feel that its presence should be challenged. However, as a practitioner and audience member I have often felt that the fact Greeks are not aware of this ‘otherness’ with relation to the chorus is actually a disadvantage for the Greek-speaking audience and practitioner alike. I feel that an awareness of the gap between ancient and modern performance and audience experience can be a source of creativity, a cause for more thorough research, and a pathway to a truly contemporary, vital and compelling re-staging of tragedy.

## **2. Breaking down the ‘problem’.**

### **i. The 19th century: the root of the problem.**

Even though in this thesis I am looking at the late 20th century and beginning of 21st, it is necessary to start with the 19th century, since the trends in that period shaped audience perceptions today.<sup>61</sup> I think there is a direct link in audience perceptions between the 19th century stagings and the ‘spoof’ chorus of *Mighty Aphrodite*. But scholars have also identified fundamental ideological issues in the beginning of Modernity that have influenced the contemporary history of reception. Simon Goldhill has looked at Greek tragedy in the context of German idealism, from the end of the 18th century through to the beginning of the 20th,<sup>62</sup> reaching the conclusion that in 19<sup>th</sup> century staging of Greek Tragedy the chorus is already a problem. Nevertheless, he notes that 19th-century conceptions of the chorus, such as that of ideal spectator (although this was in fact taken from a Peripatetic text, the pseudo-Aristotelian *Problems*),<sup>63</sup> and the voice of the author, remained influential until recently in scholarship, and their legacy still strong today in theatre and in popular notions of the chorus.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, Goldhill identifies three questions that govern the modern staging of the chorus, which were posed by German idealists and are still relevant in theatre today: Can the chorus be modern? Can it be ideal? Can it be musical? He also notes, which is especially important for this thesis, that there was little discussion of the chorus then, in the same way we note the lack of substantial scholarship on the chorus today.

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<sup>61</sup> For the 17th to the early 20th century see Hall and Macintosh (2005). For 19th century Germany in particular see Billings (2011), Goldhill (2013).

<sup>62</sup> Goldhill (2010).

<sup>63</sup> *Probl.* 19.922b26-7. See also Chapter 3 of this thesis, p.69.

<sup>64</sup> On influential popular notions of the chorus see also Goldhill (2007) 54.

Edith Hall's discussion of popular notions of the chorus in the 18th, 19th and early 20th century reveals an even broader scope of interpretations of the chorus in the arts, literature and political discourse, and as many problems and 'negative' associations that are still influential in today's culture.<sup>65</sup> Her emphasis is on the sociopolitical conditions that make the chorus seem absurd, or extremely powerful - depending on which side of the struggle for social equality one stands. She connects it with the great philosophical and social movements of the 19th century that led to the Bolshevik revolutions of 1905 and 1917:

Greek chorality was indeed a 'supreme' cultural touchstone of Modernity because the way it was conceived oscillated so frequently and perceptibly between the two great collectives of 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century thought: the collective as an ethnic/national entity, and the collective as the working class, which could and should transcend all national barriers and define itself not against other nations but against the interests of the international plutocratic ruling class.<sup>66</sup>

At the same time, Hall notes the negative and disparaging use of the notion of Greek chorus in political debate, especially in the West, due to its associations of uniformity and collective identity. These negative uses of the term come from both ends of the political spectrum—chorality, depending on who is arguing against whom, can denote an unruly mob, a dangerous threat to legal authority but also a conservative, undemocratic choir and a group of ridiculous, irresolute supporters. The reason for this must be found in the high value placed on individuality and rationality during the era of Modernity; the Cartesian ego and the concept of Free Will had placed the mind of the human being in the centre of the universe, breaking through the bonds of theocracy and monarchy. So, despite the great social movements, and the frequent positive associations of chorality within the rhetoric of what Hall calls a 'utopian collective', during that era the individual and rationality won the decisive battles in shaping the culture of the West. It is no wonder this uniform group seemed absurd and dated even then. The legacy of the chorus' image in the 19th and early 20th century is the 'ironic', tongue-in-cheek representations such as the ones mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, on Broadway, in Hollywood and elsewhere.

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<sup>65</sup> Hall (2013a).

<sup>66</sup> Hall (2013a) 283.

In the following sections I will look at the several aspects of the problem of the chorus separately.

## ii. A collective voice in the era of individuality

Who are/is the chorus? There are important studies on the identity of this group that are discussed in Chapter 3. But a definitive characteristic is its collective identity, which is in striking contrast to the individuality of the hero. This collective identity, that defines their relationship to the events on stage as well as their relationship to the assembled citizenry in the audience, is a fundamental dramaturgical tool. Today it can be easily overlooked, or taken for granted, since considerations of aesthetics, music and choreography often take precedence in a directorial vision. But in its original context, the collective identity of the chorus meant both a lifetime in education and community life defined by participation in and submission to the group, but also, and especially in the case of tragedy, the collective identity on stage, in relation to the individual hero, meant the dramatization of the concerns of the newly-born democratic regime: the tensions between the old aristocratic world and the new political system in which an *aristos* was a threat.<sup>67</sup> So for the original audience, the chorus' collectivity has a prototype outside the theatre as well as an ideological meaning inside the theatre.

For a contemporary director, the collective identity of the chorus means, in purely formal terms, mainly two things: the collective voice of a collective subject, and a uniform look. These can either be embraced or 'solved' by being eliminated. A frequent solution given to the 'problem' is the individual characterization of the chorus members, through dividing the text (which is in this case usually spoken, not sung) among them, i.e. breaking it up into individual voices, and through differences in costume that point to specific character 'types'. An example is the chorus of five modern housewives in Deborah Warner's 2001 *Medea*.<sup>68</sup> This chorus was characterized individually and many 'realistic', 21st-century elements were incorporated in their behaviour. They looked like a group of contemporary local women, with local accents denoting class and background,

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<sup>67</sup> For a longer discussion of choral collective identity see Chapter 3.

<sup>68</sup> Euripides *Medea*, translated by Kenneth McLeish & Frederic Raphael, directed by Deborah Warner, set design by Tom Pye, starring Fiona Shaw, produced by the Abbey Theatre, 2001.

dressed as if they were on their break from shopping or cooking or working, old and young, hip and conservative, their collective characteristic nothing more than their ‘normality’ and ‘womanhood’—and their near-obsessive interest in Medea’s life: she was the famous one in the neighbourhood. The directorial concept was of course centered on setting *Medea* in our own era and the chorus was meant to represent ‘normal’ people like us in the audience. The protagonist’s behaviour was interpreted by Warner in terms of contemporary psychological realism: she never left on the sun’s chariot, but instead stayed locked in a self-destructive battle with Jason, physically enacted inside the central pool on stage. In a similar way, the chorus reflected various ‘types’ of woman, and the attempt to individualize them extended to the movement and choreography. But, as most directors who have attempted creating realistic individuals out of the chorus have discovered, such an approach is of course not supported by the text and thus can only be done superficially: we are not given enough information by the playwright to create three-dimensional characters out of the chorus. The further we go into individual characterization, especially in a ‘realistic’ convention, the more trouble we get into. They chorus are as one, they are women of Corinth, and this is a different way of characterization: they have the shared concerns and sympathies of womanhood and although they suffer too, with the heroine, they don’t suffer in the same way as the very individual Medea does—nor would they ever act the way she does. Furthermore, their behaviour is not ruled by the conventions of psychological realism, restricted as they are spatially and in terms of involvement in the plot.

The avoidance of the communal voice does not only occur in productions that attempt a contemporary, near-realistic setting. In Peter Hall’s 1980 *Oresteia*,<sup>69</sup> we had a masked chorus with a mostly uniform costume - and thus no strong discernible individual characterization - chanting the amazing, rhythmical translation of Tony Harrison to the accompaniment of Harrison Birtwistle’s score. The text was broken up into individual voices throughout, with very few exceptions—a word here and there. The director’s own argument supporting his position is a vivid reminder of the cultural chasm between ancient and modern performance.

[...]even if choral speaking is well drilled so that every syllable is precisely in unison, the very efficiency produces a dehumanising effect,

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<sup>69</sup> Aescylus’ *Oresteia*, English version by Tony Harrison, directed by Peter Hall, designed by Jocelyn Herbert, music by Harrison Birtwistle, produced by the National Theatre, London, season 1980-81.



and is certainly no aid either to understanding or to the provocation of the listener's imagination. Uniform speech is like uniform movement: abstract and inhuman. It does not provoke feeling. So how were the Choruses performed? I believe that a single voice either spoke or sung or chanted every line that was complex. It could then be understood.<sup>70</sup>

Peter Hall's statement about the manner of delivery of the ancient chorus is of course unfounded and anachronistic and goes against what we know of the ancient choral lyric.<sup>71</sup> I would add here, as a spectator of Hall's *Oresteia*, albeit on video, that, especially in the *Agamemnon*, due to the mask and the minimal movement of the chorus of old men, the individual voice appeared almost disembodied, since it was hard to tell who it was coming from. The length of the parodos of *Agamemnon* also proved a challenge, despite the beauty of the language and the sharp delivery. The lack of rhythmical variety, despite the detailed scoring and division of the lines, often led to monotony. These observations are meant to point out that directors are faced with a great challenge, especially in long choral passages, and that avoiding unison speech does not necessarily lend more humanity and less abstraction.

Nonetheless, Hall describes here the very real clash between uniformity and modern sensibility. Many directors would share his concern about the negative connotations of unison speech, such as militarism, war, religious or nationalist fanaticism, political rallies, authoritarian regimes, and the faceless mass of people who follow a leader blindly. Naturally what I would like to argue in this thesis is that the above are not the correct cultural equivalents through which to view the collective identity of the chorus. Rather, I would argue that the emphasis should be on the creation or *community* rather than *uniformity*. The individual's relationship with the community and potential therein for the creation of communal identity, should be the starting point for this exploration.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Hall, Peter (2000) 31.

<sup>71</sup> Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* ll. 1348-1371 is the famous example, unique in extant tragedy, where the chorus is thrown into confusion and its collective voice almost certainly broken up into, and delivered sequentially by, individual voices.

<sup>72</sup> Helene Foley (2007) has provided a very useful categorization of directorial concepts that have attempted to create out of the chorus a sense of community on stage, through the association with historical events, gender issues, or cultural memory. A more detailed reference to Foley (2007) can be found in chapter 1, pp.16-17.

### iii. Dance and Dance Culture

In terms of form, the Chorus was originally a large dancing and singing group. How often do we see that today? In *Choral Identity in Greek Tragedy* Helene Foley notes:

Most of us are used to seeing Greek tragedies with a chorus consisting of a few actors who neither sing nor dance and often look somewhat extraneous. Yet anyone who has had the opportunity to see a modern performance that presented a large chorus with brilliant and exotic costumes dancing to electrifying music such as those created by the French director Ariane Mnouchkine in her 1991–92 *Les Atrides* (a tetralogy including Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis* before Aeschylus' *Oresteia*) would have no difficulty understanding that a chorus can easily compete with or even overshadow actors and action.<sup>73</sup>

Foley notes the contrast between this lack of dance in contemporary performance of tragedy with recent collaborations in opera between dancers and singers, and with developments in dance theatre. Why haven't theatre directors of Greek tragedy attempted the same this more often, i.e. to incorporate into Greek drama the full scale of song and dance found in the original?

On the one hand, this awkwardness towards the full dancing and singing chorus in the West owes a lot to the predominance of a naturalist acting tradition in contemporary aesthetics and in actor training.<sup>74</sup> The 'serious' subject matter of tragedy is in the dominant Western European and North American aesthetic at odds with the concept of a dancing and singing chorus, which is much easier to envision in contemporary performance of Aristophanes or Menander. It is not so easy for the Western director to conceive of a fully dancing and singing chorus of, let's say, the old men of Argos, or the old men of Thebes, who are advisors to the King. Dancing seems to be one the most awkward facets of the choral form for us in the West today. Dancing on stage is associated with ballet or contemporary dance, musical theatre, opera and the evolving genre of dance theatre. As Helene Foley notes, the expectations generated by the audience's familiarity with musical theatre and opera can interfere with its reception of the very different tragic chorus.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Foley (2003) 4.

<sup>74</sup> See Chapter 1 p.16 on actor training and the separation of the disciplines of acting, singing and dancing in performance.

<sup>75</sup> Foley (2007) 353.

On the other hand, when dancing appears in the *plot* of western drama it is perhaps associated with ‘period’ settings, with court entertainment perhaps, or a ball. It is something people engage in within a socializing context, associated with celebration and courtship. In more contemporary settings it can be associated with individualism: the individual is glorified due to virtuosity in the dance, like Billy Elliot in the feature film and musical by the same name,<sup>76</sup> or is breaking out of a social mould, and expresses himself or herself in abandon, as in *Dancing at Lughnasa*.<sup>77</sup> In the latter case the subversive power of dance is emphasized, as well as the fact that it has been oppressed in modern, literate society as a form of spontaneous expression, outside of the nightclub or the disco.

Yet ancient Greece was a dance culture and dancing had a plethora of different associations. Choral performance, independent of drama, was an ancient Panhellenic phenomenon. Audience members of the 5th-century Athenian dramatic festival had participated in choruses, dramatic or not, throughout their lives. Dancing in those choruses was not an end in itself, as in Western contemporary culture, but a way of integration into the community. Therefore dance expressed above all the bonds of tradition, with the particular emotional resonance of shared practice connecting communities and generations.<sup>78</sup>

This special emotional register of dance, then, is something that would be hard to recreate in the contemporary theatre, since it is founded on a connection between past and present, on the association with the community and its survival through the ages and on the evocation of memories of up-bringing and community life. One aspect of this, a tiny part perhaps, was evoked in Katie Mitchell’s *Women of Troy*,<sup>79</sup> when the 20th-century chorus, dressed in ball gowns, danced a stylized dance to big band jazz music as if in a ballroom, in stark contrast to the war-torn environment, evoking a bygone era, a lost past and happier times. Perhaps this struck a chord with some spectators, depending upon their age group and background: this type of dance has strong associations for a Western

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<sup>76</sup> *Billy Elliot* was originally a 2000 British film, screenplay written by Lee Hall and directed by Stephen Daldry. A stage adaptation, *Billy Elliot the Musical*, opened in 2005 in the West End at the Victoria Palace Theatre. The music was written by Elton John, book and lyrics by Lee Hall, and was directed by Stephen Daldry, choreographed by Peter Darling, and produced by Working Title Films, Old Vic Productions Plc and David Furnish.

<sup>77</sup> *Dancing at Lughnasa*, a play by Brian Friel, written in 1990.

<sup>78</sup> For a more detailed analysis of ancient Greek dance culture see Chapter 3 pp.99-105.

<sup>79</sup> *Women of Troy* by Euripides from a version by Don Taylor, directed by Katie Mitchell, designed by Bunny Christie, sound design by Gareth Fry, choreography by Struan Leslie, National Theatre, Lyttelton, 2007.

audience, historical and emotional, and perhaps came close to creating an echo of what would have been experienced by the original audience.

#### **iv. The economic factor**

Finally, as regards to the full dancing and singing chorus, another factor that comes into play is expense. The idea of twelve to fifteen people with full costumes training for an extensive rehearsal period, with a choreographer, a composer and a voice coach, is financially impossible for most theatre productions around the world today, unless they are either produced by a state-funded national theatre, or produced on Broadway or the West End—where of course we are more likely to see the chorus of a musical rather than a Greek chorus.

As a freelance theatre director I can attest to the fact that, in the current financial climate, the two main occasions when one can seriously consider a full dancing and singing chorus in a tragedy is in a drama school production or with the permanent company and the financial and logistical support of a state or national theatre. The difference between a small chorus that only speaks the text and a chorus such as the one in Mnouchkine's *Les Atrides*<sup>80</sup> is vast in terms of economics. The financial realities of a big, international, state-funded organization such as Le Théâtre du Soleil are rare and enviable, and something most independent companies can only ever dream of. In Chapter 6 of this thesis I will address the financial aspect of the Greek chorus in more detail, with emphasis on the practicalities and ethics of theatre production that were impacted by the global economic crisis.

#### **v. Connection to lost and unfamiliar rituals/religions.**

The religious function of choral dance mentioned above is of course a problem in itself for the contemporary practitioner. As we have seen, choral singing and dancing was a major part of the worship of the gods at holy places or at religious festivals. This is one of the crucial differences between the ancient chorus and the theatrical chorus today, whether it is the dramatic chorus of tragedy, the chorus of opera, musical or of the ballet.

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<sup>80</sup> *Les Atrides*, by Théâtre du Soleil, was created over the years 1990-1992 and is a tetralogy based on Aeschylus' *Oresteia* and Euripides' *Iphigeneia at Aulis*. All four plays were directed by Ariane Mnouchkine, music was composed by Jean-Jacques Lemêtre, set design by Guy-Claude François with sculptures by Erhard Stiefel, and costumes by Nathalie Thomas et Marie-Hélène Bouvet. *Iphigénie à Aulis* was translated by Jean Bollack, *Agamemnon* and *Les Choéphores* were translated by Ariane Mnouchkine and *Les Euménides* was translated by Hélène Cixous.

There is of course one chorus that retains a religious function today, and that is the chorus or choir singing in church, such as in oratoria. Some see this contemporary religious chorus as providing the strongest link to the ancient prototype. In fact, for a Western audience, Christianity is inevitably most often the prism through which to interpret religious or ritual behaviour on stage.

Of this interpretation and its analogy with Christianity there is one famous example, which is perhaps the only significant production that achieves the integration of the chorus' presence within the logic of a contemporary ritual context, a Pentecostal church. That is of course Lee Breuer's *Gospel and Colonus*,<sup>81</sup> which, as Helene Foley points out, is also unique in its integration of the full range of choral utterances found in the original: 'a version of the full mixture of speech, act-dividing song, and shared lyrics between actor and chorus.'<sup>82</sup> Goff and Simpson also note this production's exemplary integration of the musical element of tragedy in a contemporary setting, attributing it not only to the African-American gospel form but to 'Breuer's own commitment to the ideal of the 'Gesamkunstwerk'. Indicated by this latter term is a theatrical event which calls on all the resources of the human body, including speech, song, and dance, to provide a visual and emotional as well as intellectual experience (Cohn 1982:164).'<sup>83</sup>

Described by its creators as an African American oratorio, *Gospel at Colonus* sets the story of Oedipus in a Pentecostal church, the story narrated by the preacher. Among the successes of this production, in addition to creating a choral collective with contemporary resonance, a full Pentecostal church chorus, was the religious atmosphere that made sense today. The production has a story-telling, narrative form, with a preacher telling the story, the chorus responding vividly, and the main characters appearing for solo songs and interactions with the chorus. The role of Oedipus was split between an actor narrating it, who also played the preacher-narrator, and the singer Clarence Fountain singing the part with the gospel group the Blind Boys of Alabama. It has been noted that there were some losses in terms of the original material, especially in terms of the discrepancies between the theology of Sophocles and that of the production. Edith Hall in her programme note for the Edinburgh revival of the adaptation in 2010 writes:

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<sup>81</sup> *Gospel at Colonus*, an adaptation of *Oedipus at Colonus* created by director Lee Breuer and composer Bob Telson, premiered at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in the context of the New Wave Festival in 1983 and subsequently toured extensively in the US and abroad. It had a Broadway run in 1988.

<sup>82</sup> Foley (2007).

<sup>83</sup> Goff and Simpson (2007) 180-81.

In sacrificing the harsh grandeur of ancient Greek ethics and metaphysics, *Gospel at Colonus* nevertheless achieved what hardly any productions of ancient Greek tragedy can lay claim to—the experience of an emotionally responsive singing collective to the significant and solemn ancient mythical narrative [...] While that means drastic metaphysical contortions of Sophocles, it offers a very effective synergy in terms of *medium* (the antiphonal ritual chorus), and curiously, a certain numinous atmosphere that conjures an apprehension of the presence of the divine. Here, too, Breuer and Telson seem to have intuited something profoundly important about the respect for the powers running the universe, however remote and inscrutable, which pervades Sophoclean tragedy.<sup>84</sup>

Tyrone Guthrie's *Oedipus Rex* at Stratford Ontario in 1955, is one of the few other well-known example of a production with strong echoes from Christianity, which made use of the ritual of Holy Communion as a structural element of the performance.<sup>85</sup>

The downside of a strong analogy with Christianity in performance is that it can lead to a narrow view of the religious function of the Greek chorus, as well as an underestimation of their theatrical function. The context of the original performance is much more complex: since in classical Athens there is a corresponding form outside the theatre, i.e. the chorus, whose function is religious, the chorus in the theatre carries with it this religious dimension, on top of or interconnected with its dramatic identity and its role in the drama. This dimension is available to the tragedian who may choose to activate it whenever he deems appropriate or useful to the plot. But, at the same time, the religious function is not always active, nor is it the sole defining characteristic of their dramatic identity. It is *one* of the available options, one strand of their characterization, among many other concerns including ideological issues pertaining to the new democratic system, issues of ethnicity, gender, and war etc.<sup>86</sup>

We must also remember that the context of the entire performance was a festival in honour of Dionysus, technically a religious festival. And although the religious character of the festival, in the contemporary sense, is a point of debate among scholars, the chorus' ability to evoke images of altar worship, sacrifice, lamentation, religious celebration, is strengthened, or underlined meta-dramatically, by such images that

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<sup>84</sup> Edith Hall's programme note for *Gospel at Colonus*. Programme can be found at the Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama in Oxford.

<sup>85</sup> Varakis (2008) 262 ff.

<sup>86</sup> See Chapter 3 of this thesis for a discussion of choral dramatic identity.

occurred in ‘real life’ only moments ago within the context of the festival. This is one more factor that clouds for us today the full dynamic of the chorus’ on-stage presence.<sup>87</sup>

The religious function of the chorus is also connected to the topic of ritual, which for some scholars is part of the essence of tragedy.<sup>88</sup> Several rituals, with prototypes in the religious and social life of classical Athens, are re-enacted or evoked in tragedy, with varying degrees of connection to a metaphysical world: supplication, pouring libations, religious service at a temple, sacrifice, funeral rites, even necromancy. Ritual is interconnected with the plot through a complex web of on-stage action and textual imagery. The chorus is often the main agent of ritual, a function that is facilitated by the religious prototype that they can at any time embody. Directors and scholars are fascinated by this topic and its potential implications, and a longer discussion on the topic of ritual is to be found in Chapter 4 of this thesis. It is a huge and contested topic, but one that has often yielded exciting theatrical results.

#### **vi. The authority of myth and an ideological problem**

The religious authority of the chorus is further enhanced by the frequent references to myth in choral lyric. That is another element that probably would have strengthened the bond between audience and chorus, but whose dynamic is hard to recreate today.<sup>89</sup>

Myth was at the heart of cultural, religious and ritual life. It carried weight and authority because it was ancient knowledge shared by all. Thus it formed the foundation that kept the ideology and identity of the community in place. And myth, with the perspective that it can lend to the on-stage action, is found mostly in the chorus text. Goldhill argues that this gives the chorus a special kind of power, a religious and moral authority, since myth reflects the communal wisdom of centuries.<sup>90</sup> Even in moments of intense tragic irony, when the chorus are in the dark or are deceived with relation to the

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<sup>87</sup> See Easterling (1988) 89 and *passim* for the religious function of the chorus in the plot. See also Chapter 3 for a detailed discussion of the religious festival context.

<sup>88</sup> A detailed analysis of ritual in tragedy, including a discussion of the theory of ritual origins, is to be found in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

<sup>89</sup> See especially Gould (1996) and Goldhill (1996).

<sup>90</sup> Goldhill (1996).

plot, they still carry with them universal truths that are found in myth, and can help deepen our understanding of the actions of the hero.

The added perspective of myth, the longing to find ‘explanation through narrative’,<sup>91</sup> is one of the reasons why directors today turn to Greek tragedy—especially if they wish to comment on current socio-political conditions in their work by giving a wider perspective on local events. However, aside from the main plot, the great variety of mythical stories in the text, spoken mainly by the chorus, can be largely unfamiliar to the modern audience—at least they can’t have the same resonance as they did for the original spectator. Today, some of us have some knowledge of a few of these myths: maybe we are classical scholars, or fans of classical mythology, or regular theatre goers familiar with the Greeks—but most likely, for the majority in the audience, these myths stir up memories from children’s books, or stories from within genres of literature such as fiction. Myth does not carry the same weight as it did for the original audience. It is not the basis of a narrative forming our national identity, as foundation myths were for the ancient Athenians. On the contrary, reference to myth can even make the chorus sound distant, a relic from the past or didactic to our ears, as the parody of the Greek chorus in *Mighty Aphrodite* illustrates vividly.

Part of the problem is that in our era idealism is in crisis: the idealism of a young and expanding state, like classical Athens was at the beginning of the 5th century BCE, is not something that can easily find a parallel in 21st-century Western Europe today. The foundation myths of ancient Greece are not unlike the narratives surrounding the birth of the nation-state in the 19th century.<sup>92</sup> But the sophisticated theatre audience of our multi-cultural Western capitals today questions absolute truths, the meaning of a heroic past, the universal truth of myth. It is hard in this age of questioning to draw emotional power from ‘the glorious past’ or a ‘noble hero’ or ‘bravery in war’ or ‘sacrifice for the fatherland’, or even ‘tradition’ so easily: it is an age of cynicism and doubt and these ideas are dissected and challenged. Furthermore, since the middle of the 20th century we have become acutely sensitive to the dangers of nationalism, lurking behind the narrative of foundation myths. How can we then find new ways to connect with the dynamic of myth that do not seem stilted?

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<sup>91</sup> Altena (2005).

<sup>92</sup> See Goldhill (2010) mentioned above, p.28.



In one respect I feel that this problem may be turned to an advantage. I propose that tragedy is the perfect medium for addressing such fundamental shifts in society and ideology, since during the 5th century there was a similar transition, causing philosophical and ideological tension that was reflected in drama. In extant tragedy we can trace the gradual movement from an age protected by the safety net of myth, cult and patriotism, to an era of deep crisis that developed along with the long Peloponnesian war. The certainty of theodicy, morality and justice in Aeschylus seems very far removed from Euripides' chaotic universe, populated by cruel gods such as the ones in *Hippolytus* or *Trojan Women*. The debate in Aristophanes' *Frogs* between the two tragedians reflects this huge cultural shift that, according to the play, took place in the few decades between the death of Aeschylus and the death of Euripides. In lines 1006-1044, Aristophanes' Aeschylus, after defining the poet's duty 'to make people better citizens', attacks Euripides as responsible for the moral deterioration for the Athenians:

**Αἰσχύλος**

[...] ἵνα μὴ φάσκη δ' ἀπορεῖν με,  
ἀπόκριναι μοι, τίνοσ οὖνεκα χρὴ θαυμάζειν ἄνδρα ποιητήν;

**Εὐριπίδης**

δεξιότητος καὶ νουθεσίας, ὅτι βελτίους τε ποιοῦμεν  
τοὺς ἀνθρώπους ἐν ταῖς πόλεσιν.  
[...]

**Αἰσχύλος**

σκέψαι τοίνυν οἷους αὐτοὺς παρ' ἐμοῦ παρεδέξατο πρῶτον,  
εἰ γενναίους καὶ τετραπήχεις, καὶ μὴ διαδρασιπολίτας,  
μηδ' ἀγοραίους μηδὲ κοβάλους ὥσπερ νῦν μηδὲ πανούργους,  
ἀλλὰ πνέοντας δόρυ καὶ λόγχας καὶ λευκολόφους τρυφαλείας  
καὶ πῆληκας καὶ κνημίδας καὶ θυμοὺς ἑπταβοείους.

**Aeschylus**

But lest he should pretend I am cornered and helpless - answer me this: for what qualities ought a poet be admired?

**Euripides**

For skilfulness and for good counsel, and because we make people better members of their communities.  
[...]

**Aeschylus**

Well then, consider what they were like when he first took them over from me: whether they were noble six-footers, and not duty-dodging citizens, nor vulgar tricksters that they are now, nor

rascals and rogues, but men who breathed spears and lances and white-crested casques and helmets and greaves and fighting spirits seven oxhides thick.

He explains how he had cultivated the Athenians' character, by creating plays about war, such as *Persians* and *Seven Against Thebes*, which inspired bravery in the audience and desire to fight for their homeland.

**Εὐριπίδης**

καὶ τί σὺ δρᾶσας οὕτως αὐτοὺς γενναίους ἐξεδίδας;  
[...]

**Αἰσχύλος**

δρᾶμα ποιήσας Ἄρεως μεστόν.

**Διόνυσος**

ποῖον;

**Αἰσχύλος**

τοὺς ἔπτ' ἐπὶ Θήβας;  
ὁ θεασάμενος πᾶς ἄν τις ἀνὴρ ἠράσθη δάιος εἶναι.  
[...]  
ἀλλ' ὑμῖν αὐτ' ἐξῆν ἀσκεῖν, ἀλλ' οὐκ ἐπὶ τοῦτ' ἐτράπεσθε.  
εἶτα διδάξας Πέρσας μετὰ τοῦτ' ἐπιθυμεῖν ἐξεδίδας  
νικᾶν ἀεὶ τοὺς ἀντιπάλους, κοσμήσας ἔργον ἄριστον.

**Euripides**

And what did you do to teach them to be so very noble?  
[...]

**Aeschylus**

I wrote a play that was full of the spirit of war.

**Euripides**

What play?

**Aeschylus**

*Seven Against Thebes*. Any man who watched that would have been seized with a desire to play the warrior.  
[...]

Well, you had the chance to cultivate those qualities too, only you didn't set yourselves to do it. - Then after that I produced the *Persians*, and taught them always to be eager to defeat their opponents, thereby adding lustre to a splendid achievement.

Finally, he sets himself at the end of a long line of legendary and illustrious poets that shaped the tradition and culture of Ancient Greece, from Orpheus to Homer.

ταῦτα γὰρ ἄνδρας χρὴ ποιητὰς ἀσκεῖν. σκέψαι γὰρ ἀπ' ἀρχῆς  
ὥς ὠφέλιμοι τῶν ποιητῶν οἱ γενναῖοι γεγένηται.  
Ὀρφεὺς μὲν γὰρ τελετὰς θ' ἡμῖν κατέδειξε φόνων τ' ἀπέχεσθαι,  
Μουσαῖος δ' ἐξακέσεις τε νόσων καὶ χρησμούς, Ἡσίοδος δὲ  
γῆς ἐργασίας, καρπῶν ὥρας, ἀρότους· ὁ δὲ θεῖος Ὅμηρος  
ἀπὸ τοῦ τιμὴν καὶ κλέος ἔσχεν πλὴν τοῦδ' ὅτι χρήστ' ἐδίδασκεν,  
τάξεις ἀρετὰς ὀπλίσεις ἀνδρῶν;

That's the sort of think that poets should make a practice of doing. Look at how, from the very beginning, the noblest of poets have conferred benefits on us. Orpheus revealed mystic rites to us and taught us to refrain from killings; Musaeus about oracles and cures for sicknesses; Hesiod about working the land, the seasons for crops, times for ploughing; and the divine Homer, what did he get his honour and renown from if not from the fact that he gave good instruction about the tactics and virtues and arming of soldiers?

It is a given, in Aeschylus' 'self-promotion' speech, that Euripides did not contribute to the improvement of Athenian character through example in his plays, nor to the preservation of tradition. Instead, the comic Aeschylus exclaims with indignation, his opponent populated the tragic stage with women of low morals, women in love!

### **Αἰσχύλος**

[...]

ὄθεν ἡμῇ φρὴν ἀπομαξαμένη πολλὰς ἀρετὰς ἐποίησεν,  
Πατρόκλων, Τεύκρων θυμολεόντων, ἵν' ἐπαίροιμ' ἀνδραπολίτην  
ἀντεκτείνειν αὐτὸν τούτοις, ὁπότεν σάλπιγγος ἀκούσῃ.  
ἀλλ' οὐ μὰ Δί' οὐ Φαίδρας ἐποίουν πόρνας οὐδὲ Σθενεβοίας,  
οὐδ' οἷδ' οὐδεὶς ἦντιν' ἐρῶσαν πώποτ' ἐποίησα γυναῖκα.

### **Aeschylus**

[...]

Using that as a model, my art created many portraits of courage - of men like Patroclus or the lion-hearted Teucer - in the hope of inspiring every man in the citizen body to measure up to their standard every time he hears the sound of a trumpet. But by Zeus,

I never used to create trollops like Phaedra or Stheneboea; in fact no one can point to any instance, in any of my compositions of a woman in love.

Aristophanes, *Frogs*, 1006-1044, transl. Alan H. Sommerstein, 1996

Even allowing for comic exaggeration, Aristophanes here must have known he would be striking a chord. The *Frogs* was produced in 405 BC, a few months before the final defeat of Athens in the Peloponnesian war. Even though they had been victorious in the recent naval battle at Arginusae, they had suffered crippling casualties and the aftermath looked more like a defeat: the generals in charge were executed, Athens couldn't afford to lose another battle, and, to make matters worse, by now Sparta had the Persians on her side.<sup>93</sup> With their state, their culture, their democratic constitution and their existence under threat, the poet is urging the Athenians to look back to their tradition. Is Aristophanes here hoping to give them strength in the final hour, by reminding them who they are, what their ancestors had achieved?

What is interesting for this discussion is the implication, from Aristophanes through the words of the comic Aeschylus, that Athenians have forgotten their tradition, because the cultural climate has been changing. According to Aristophanes the poets, like Euripides, stopped providing this necessary link to the glorious past while preserving tradition intact. Their innovations and moral relativism have brought ruin on the character of the audience and consequently to the state. The ideological and philosophical shifts taking place in Athens towards the end of the 5th century, bemoaned by Aristophanes in the *Frogs*, can also be seen as the result of philosophical advances and a progressive, humanist spirit—and therefore they are worth exploring by contemporary directors of tragedy. The search for meaning, the place of man in a universe of unanswerable questions, the threat of annihilation, were pivotal issues that may transcend the apparent didacticism of some choral passages.

Within the texts themselves, even in Aeschylus, we can find subversive elements and difficult, unanswered questions, presented in highly sophisticated debate that eludes didacticism and black-and-white solutions. In the appeasement of the Erinyes at the end of the *Oresteia*, for example, which may seem straightforward to contemporary directors, the fresh memory of violence, and of the passionate debates that preceded the final

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<sup>93</sup> On the prospects of the Athenian state at the time of the original production of *Frogs* see Sommerstein (1996) p.1 ff.

resolution, remains as a vivid warning of the fragility of the relatively new democratic regime and real danger of civil war. The historical context of the *Eumenides*, performed in 458 BCE, was the bloodshed that followed Ephialtes' reforms a few years earlier. He was a radical democrat who tried to restrict the powers of the aristocratic Areopagites, but his reforms were followed by an oligarchic plot and what was essentially a civil war which shook the democratic system. He was assassinated in 461 but the powers of the Areopagus were indeed diminished. Edith Hall writes of this historical incident and its connection to the ending of the *Eumenides*:

Orestes' trial for the murder of his mother is presented in *Eumenides*, the last play of the *Oresteia*, as the institution's foundational first trial. The death of Ephialtes and others must have meant that Athena's several commands to cease all factional violence at the end of the *Oresteia* really meant something to Aeschylus' audience just three years later.<sup>94</sup>

Tragedy was born in a moment of historical transition, and thus dramatizes the tensions created when the old aristocratic world is replaced by a new system. This new system, along with the imperialist policy of Athens, is rife with philosophical and ideological problems that are explored more blatantly in Aristophanes and more subtly in tragedy. In Chapter 6 of this thesis I will focus on contemporary revivals set against the backdrop of the current global crisis, that have found fruitful material in the ideological content of tragedy, using the lense of contemporary ethical conundrums.

## **vii. The Problem of Naturalism**

Expectations of aesthetics and genre, the result of our conditioning as theatre audiences over the years, especially through the influence of naturalism in acting, also create hurdles in the contemporary interpretation of the chorus. Aside from the aesthetic confusion that the song-and-dance form may bring to the drama, the chorus famously does not (always) have continuity of character.

First of all, their dramatic identity eludes a fixed definition, as it is differentiated from one play to the next. It can range from being very close to the Aristotelian tenet that the chorus should be one of the characters (Aristotle *Poetics* 1456a, 27) as in the

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<sup>94</sup> Hall (2015).

*Eumenides*, or Aeschylus' *Suppliant Women*, to a more philosophical, detached and shifting presence, such as the chorus of Euripides' *Electra* or *Iphigeneia at Aulis*. Goldhill provides a useful categorization of the chorus' role and involvement in the drama and points out that, even when the chorus has high stakes in the action, and can be defined as one of the characters, we still see great differences in agency and involvement in the plot.<sup>95</sup> The example he brings here is the contrast in behaviour between the chorus of Aeschylus' *Eumenides* and Euripides' *Trojan Women*: they both have high stakes in the story, but the latter remains passive and helpless throughout, while the former actively pursues their goal. However, as Goldhill points out, the greatest problem for the contemporary practitioner is the shifting voice of the chorus within the same play:

Consistency and continuity of character is a standard aim of contemporary acting. The chorus's ability to shift between a more naturalistic engagement with the action, and a more abstract reflection of it is a particular challenge, both for the director and for the audience. This 'shifting voice' is an essential dynamic of the chorus.<sup>96</sup>

This ability is part of choral identity, part of the chorus' history and function outside and inside the theatre, and part of its dynamic bond with the community. Its frequent shifting between plural lyric voice and singular, subject 'I' voice also shows how its role and contribution subtly mutates and fluctuates within the same play. It is unlike any existing group we have in our tradition outside the theatre. And of course the rules of naturalistic acting rarely remain intact for the duration of its on-stage presence.

For all of these reasons many contemporary Western directors of Greek tragedy have either reduced the chorus or turned for inspiration to less naturalistic theatrical forms and also living traditional cultures, such as those of Asia, the Middle East or the Balkans.

In modern Greece directors have used native folk tradition successfully to the same purpose. They have harnessed folk dance, the Orthodox liturgy and traditional lament with great theatrical results. For generations they have experimented with the problem of combining the difficult choral text with the formal elements of dance and song. However, the 'problem of the chorus' acquires a whole new dimension in contemporary performance in Greece (and Cyprus). In the next section I would like to

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<sup>95</sup> Goldhill (2007) 75-76.

<sup>96</sup> Goldhill (2007) 78.

discuss the particular challenges in these two countries, which have had a distinctive contemporary tradition in the staging of Greek drama.

### 3. The chorus in contemporary Greece and Cyprus

The first conclusion one quickly comes to is that within this tradition the chorus is basically a *sine-qua-non*. The large, singing-dancing choruses in Modern Greece and Cyprus are largely considered a success story in modern performance of Greek drama, especially when compared to the pared-down, anaemic choruses of the West, who usually recite instead of singing and hardly ever dance. On the success and influence of modern Greek directors in staging the chorus, Fiona Macintosh writes:

It is, moreover, choral performance in modern Greek productions that has been most instructive to directors from the rest of Europe; and here, it is modern Greek rituals (rather than Reinhardt) that are understood to inform those performances. When London audiences were able to enjoy the Teatro Technis production of Aeschylus' *Persians* directed by Karolos Koun at the Aldwych Theatre in 1965, for example, it was the chorus that was a revelation to those who had come to conceive of the Greek tragic chorus as an archaic encumbrance.<sup>97</sup>

In the same chapter, Macintosh summarizes the two main trends that have marked the contemporary performance history of Greek drama in Greece, represented by the Ethniko Teatro productions (National Theatre of Greece) and Karolos Koun-Theatro Technis respectively, identifying the German influence in the former and the use of folk tradition and ritual in the latter.<sup>98</sup> I would like to look at these two trends in more detail in the following paragraphs.

First of all, we have to take into account the nature of the Epidaurus festival, the dominant platform for contemporary production of ancient Greek drama for more than fifty years. Inaugurated in the summer of 1955 with Rondiris' *Hippolytus* (Ethniko Teatro), the festival has been a great influence in forming directorial visions in modern times and in the staging of the chorus in particular. The size of the theatre, the prestige of the festival, the type of productions that are hosted there, the participating theatres, the expectations of the audience: all these lead to a contemporary 'tradition' for staging Greek

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<sup>97</sup> Macintosh (1997) 309.

<sup>98</sup> Macintosh (1997) 309.

drama, characterized by large choruses in grand-scale productions, where the music, choreography and design are of the utmost importance. Some of the greatest Greek artists of our times have taken part in this festival, such as Koun, Theodorakis, Hatzidakis, Xenakis and Tsarouchis. The Epidauros productions may not be the only productions of Greek drama in Greece each year, but they are the most influential in creating an aesthetic and an audience culture. A festival that for twenty years hosted Ethniko Theatro productions exclusively, Epidauros opened its doors to other companies in the 70s. The inclusion of Karolos Koun-Theatro Technis in the post-dictatorship years marked a new era for the festival.<sup>99</sup>

Summarizing these fifty-odd years of productions of Greek drama, we can say that the tradition of Ethniko gave us the grand scale, and within this tradition great artists worked for years on the problem of combining text with movement, composers drew fruitfully from Byzantine and folk tradition for the music, choreographers trained generations of performers in a combination of physical stylization and emotional expressiveness, and participation in a chorus became an almost necessary step in actors' training.

The founder of the festival, and influential director Dimitris Rondiris, was a pupil of Max Reinhardt, and his legacy was the dominant German influence in Ethniko Theatro productions for years. Alexia Papakosta summarizes Rondiris' approach to the chorus as follows:

The Chorus, in D. Rondiris' view, recites rhythmically, sings and, to the accompaniment of music, underlines the rhythms. When the spoken text moves away from recitation and towards the form of song, in order to express emotional changes and to express human emotion, then the movement of the chorus is closer to dance.<sup>100</sup>

In this view of the chorus, the tools available to choreographers of Ethniko productions were stylization, symmetry, geometry, choreographical patterns, even stillness. The choreographic 'ideal' was often compared to statues and vase paintings, and harmony between movement, text and music was the main goal.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> See Georgousopoulos and Gogos (2002) for detailed information on and reviews of the productions at the Epidauros festival from its foundation in 1954 to the beginning of the 21st century. The legacies of Ethniko Theatro and Theatro Technis and their differences can be traced through press reviews and ample visual material.

<sup>100</sup> Papakosta (2002) 199.

<sup>101</sup> Papakosta (2002) 198-199.



Koun, as we know, broke with the Ethniko tradition of a lyrical chorus in which choreography, symmetry, poetry and music were predominant. His approach was revolutionary, in its introduction of movement as a result of improvisation in rehearsal, instead of choreography, in its use of psychological motivation that brought the chorus closer to the center of the action, and its influence from folk rituals of mourning and celebration. There were two productions by Theatro Technis that brought Koun international fame in the explosive period of the 60s and 70s and influenced the staging of Greek drama for many generations. Aeschylus' *Persians*<sup>102</sup> premiered at the World Arts Festival in London in 1965 and had a revival at Epidaurus in 1976, after the dictatorship. Aristophanes' *Birds*<sup>103</sup>, which was first produced causing scandal in Greece in 1959, received the first prize for best foreign production at the Théâtre de Nations festival in Paris in 1962, was performed in London in 1965 (see above) and was finally revived at Epidaurus in 1975.<sup>104</sup> It is clear that Koun's revolutionary approach had to do with a strong socio-political dimension in his work, in the troubled cold war years before and during the Greek dictatorship: his was a theatre 'of the people' (*laiko*, translated also as 'folk'), and that vital connections with the audience through the chorus. Peter Mackridge in a public lecture entitled *Drama in the Colonels' Greece: Impressions of an Eye-witness*, given at the Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama at Oxford, on June 6th 2011, described his experience of watching Koun's *Persians*, focusing on an incident legendary among theatre people in Greece: the audience reacting to the messenger speech by standing up and clapping for a few minutes in the middle of the performance. What triggered this reaction was the Chorus leader's line 242, when he says of the Athenians that 'They are called neither the slaves nor the subjects of a single man' (Edith Hall's translation, 1996). The historical-political context was of course the people's anger at Constantine, then King of Greece, whose insidious interventions in politics during those troubled years precipitated the collapse of the democratic regime. Edith Hall points out that Koun was 'perhaps the first to use the play to criticize 'the barbarian within', the internal tyrant embodied in the hard right wing of Greek politics.'<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Aeschylus' *Persians*, directed by Karolos Koun, translated by Panos Moullas, set and costume design by Yiannis Tsarouchis, music by Yiannis Christou, produced by Theatro Technis.

<sup>103</sup> Aristophanes' *Birds*, directed by Karolos Koun, translated by Vassilis Rotas, music by Manos Hatzidakis, set and costume design by Yiannis Tsarouchis, choreography by Zouzou Nikoloudi, produced by Theatro Technis.

<sup>104</sup> On the troubled performance history of Koun's *Birds* see Van Steen (2007).

<sup>105</sup> Hall (2007).

Koun's approach to choreography, or rather chorus movement, also has an ideological foundation, as we saw in the previous sections. Angeliki Varaki describes this clearly, with reference to the director's own words:

The ceremonial sense was not, however, associated with strict formality. In Koun's view 'military' formality was an alien concept for the Greeks because even within a traditional pattern of collective movement and vocal expression there was still room for spontaneity and individual creativity. When discussing the issue he brings forth as an example modern Greece's lament practices and the way in which they allow space for spontaneous movement and cries within the framework of the ceremonial. (Koun:1987: 66)<sup>106</sup>

After the years of statuesque formality of the Ethnico choruses, this was something new that opened up new possibilities for choreographers and directors.

The two poles of influence, that of Koun, and that of Ethniko, as well as combinations of the two schools in directorial visions, have created a strong tradition with rich results. Aside from Koun many others drew from modern Greek folk traditions with great success.<sup>107</sup> The aesthetic and role of the chorus in modern Greece has been given great emphasis, which continues to this day. We see large choruses, who sing and dance, we hear text translated into masterful poetry or some times in the original ancient Greek text. Furthermore, the modern Greek-speaking audience is used to the chorus, embrace it and have certain expectations from it. As a result, we have a dynamic presence which bears some resemblances to its original form. But not as many resemblances as is commonly believed.<sup>108</sup>

One problem, with regard to audience response, is that this tradition brought with it a hostile and suspicious attitude towards innovation that lasted for several decades.<sup>109</sup> A sense of sanctity violated underscores the audience's heated disapproval of what are considered 'failed' directorial visions. For years there has been a generally fixed idea of what to do with the chorus. Koun's one-time revolutionary approach is now part of tradition, while new experiments are not easily accepted. Furthermore, the huge cultural

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<sup>106</sup> Varaki (2011) 267.

<sup>107</sup> See Chapter 6 for the evolution of the folk element post-Koun in the history of reception of Greek drama in Modern Greece.

<sup>108</sup> For a longer discussion on the notion of modern Greek privileged understanding of Attic drama see Chapter 6.

<sup>109</sup> Since the 1990s a gradual introduction of more avant-garde elements in the approach to Greek drama has been increasingly influential in the field. The last two years (2014-15) marked a perceptible turning point, and this shift is discussed at length in Chapter 6.

impact of the festival makes it hard to shake off the aesthetic of the open air theatre for Greek drama and to imagine it on a different scale. One consequence of this, in purely practical terms, is that the scale and aesthetic of the lavish open-air productions have been so influential that in-door, low-budget and more experimental attempts seem to the audience a failure.

Despite all that, there have been innovative directors, even in Epidaurus. The tendencies that marked the last thirty years of Greek drama around the world, such as formal experimentation and political drive in the content, are also reflected in modern Greek and Cypriot productions. Karolos Koun's momentous contribution, that started with his *Persians* in 1965 (not at Epidaurus, since Theatro Technis did not take part until the 70s), and continued with his revolutionary approach to Aristophanes, was at the forefront of this new approach to Greek drama and sparked innovation both in Greece and around the world. Later on, in the 80s, a generation of artists in the Cyprus Theatre Organization, many of them students of Koun, in a surge of creative energy fueled by the 1974 war in their country, contributed to the festival with innovative work and urgent socio-political content. For example, Euripides' *Suppliants*,<sup>110</sup> directed by Nicos Charalambous, used ritual elements and strong echoes from the aftermath of the war. Here the recent traumatic historical event, that left many dead, refugees and missing persons, created a community on stage and a community with the audience: the success of this production lay largely with the successful realization of this communal identity.<sup>111</sup> Formal experimentations with language also brought about good results: A rediscovery of Menander in the early 90s, with a production of *Samia* with full dancing and singing chorus, the result of the collaboration between director Evis Gabrielides, poet Yiannis Varveris, and composer Michalis Christodoulides, was a historic moment for the festival and used the 'katharevousa' language of 19th century Greece in its translation and an 'Athens during belle-epoque' aesthetic.<sup>112</sup> Today important directors and performers,

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<sup>110</sup> Euripides *Suppliants*, produced by THOC (the Cyprus Theatre Organization, i.e. the National Theatre of Cyprus) in 1978, translated by Kostis Kolotas, directed by Nikos Charalambous, set and costume design by Yiorgos Ziakas, and music by Michalis Christodoulidis. The play was first performed in Cyprus in 1978, then presented in Greece in 1979, in the Athens Festival, at Lycabettus theatre, and at Epidaurus in 1980, marking a new era for the participation of the National Theatre of Cyprus in the Epidaurus festival.

<sup>111</sup> A detailed description and analysis of this seminal production will be given in Chapter 4 of this thesis. On the contrary the same director's formalist production of *Phoenissae* a few years later, with strong symbols, stunning visuals and sensory overload, did not have the same success in terms of emotional impact.

<sup>112</sup> Menander's *Samia*, translated by Yiannis Varveris, directed by Evis Gabrielides, music by Michalis Christodoulides, choreographed by Isidoros Sideris, produced by the Cyprus Theatre Organisation, 1993.

continue their work and research on Greek drama, with worldwide appeal and a desire for re-shaping and new understanding.<sup>113</sup>

And yet we still very frequently read or feel that a chorus can leave the Greek audience unmoved, or distanced. We read for example, the review for the 2016 production of *Seven Against Thebes* by the National Theatre of Northern Greece:

We were once again faced by this omnipresent Chorus of the last few decades, which is self-referential, aimless and steretotypical, with their gaze fixed somewhere in space, with spasmodic movement, bending their knees and their waist...And who, on top of everything, seemed too apathetic for the occasion.<sup>114</sup>

Or, even worse, most of the time there is a lack of questioning or challenging the usual forms, an ‘acceptance’ of the chorus. Whereas innovations in the separate fields of tragic acting, scenic design, music, choreography, the use of mask, are important and undeniable, today we feel once again the need for re-definition that will lead to new energy and dynamic. At this aesthetic and historical turning point the chorus needs to be once again a force that will bring about the audience’s deep emotional participation in the events.

Maybe part of the problem is that we look at the chorus separately from the rest of the drama. On top of that, we look at each of its parts, poetry, music and dance, separately—which I suppose is inevitable in the contemporary Western tradition of separate disciplines. Even so, when we read studies or reviews, or even directorial concepts, we find that the emphasis is on its formal parts and the question is usually *who* will choreograph, *who* will write the music; a ‘good’ chorus generally means they dance and sing well, wear great costumes and complement the picturization of the mise-en-scène effectively. Georgousopoulos’ and Gogos’ 2002 book on the Epidaurus festival<sup>115</sup> follows characteristically this same approach, as the chapters are entitled ‘directorial concepts’, ‘text-translation’, ‘music’, ‘choreography’, ‘costume’ etc. The question of ‘how to do’ the chorus is rarely expressed in terms of what makes the chorus an integral part of the drama and the community. Using contemporary *forms* in

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<sup>113</sup> See Chapter 6 of this thesis.

<sup>114</sup> Ioannidis (2016).

<sup>115</sup> Georgousopoulos and Gogos (2002).

the music and movement, which has been done in Greece, drawing even from rap music or martial arts,<sup>116</sup> does not adequately address the issue most of the time, because the impulse behind such attempts is usually the desire for purely formal experimentation.

Furthermore, even if a director initially approaches the task having considered in depth the importance of the particular chorus' dramatic role and identity in that particular play, the way rehearsals are planned for most productions defeats the purpose: what often happens is that the separation of the chorus from the drama starts in rehearsal. As a practitioner who is familiar with this, I ask myself: Since we do not have a contemporary choral culture, why do we continue to rehearse the chorus as if we do? That is, why does the chorus rehearse for months separately from the rest of the company, with the choreographer and the composer, while the director looks in on their rehearsal from time to time? That is the typical attitude in a production of a National or State Regional theatre in the last few decades. But if they are separate in rehearsal, they will remain a separate element in the final product, unless their relationship with the action can be radically questioned and re-defined in the contemporary context. But even in Greece, until recently, this was not common practice. This brings me back to my initial point. My feeling is that even though the audience are used to it, they do not always deeply understand the chorus. The audience's experience does not always relate in a fundamental way to its presence. This familiarity with the chorus has been theatrically deadly.

Concluding this section, I would like to clarify that experimentation and innovation in Greek drama do exist in Greece. What I described was the established tradition, against which every new production has to be measured, inevitably. Furthermore, the strong modern-day tradition of chorus training in drama schools and large theatre companies continues to have beneficial results for actor training. Many actors today in Greece and Cyprus admit that they acquired invaluable stage skills through their chorus work: awareness of spatial relationship with others and group rhythm, ability to work within an ensemble by responding kinaesthetically, ability to improvise within an ensemble, and, even if they don't have formal dance training, awareness of their body's shape in space, and ability to combine complex text and song with rigorous movement. All these qualities of ensemble work and of physical and spatial awareness developed through chorus training are extremely useful throughout an actor's career.

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<sup>116</sup> Such as in Aeschylus' *Persians*, translated by Nikoleta Frantzila, directed by Lydia Koniordou, set and costume design by Lili Kentaka, music by Takis Farazis, choreography by Apostolia Papadamaki, a National Theatre of Greece production, 2006.

Greece is now going through one of the darkest times in its contemporary history. This social upheaval will inevitably be reflected in the arts. In recent years we can see the beginning of a new wave of approaches to Greek drama which will reflect this time of doubting, questioning and introspection. Greek tragedy, which dramatizes trauma within the community, seems the perfect arena for reflecting on the political and social situation today.

#### 4. A case study: Koun's 1980 *Oresteia*.

Karolos Koun's productions of Ancient Greek drama with Theatro Technis left a great legacy in the Greek and international theatre scene. He was active in the theatre for more than fifty years, and although he directed only a handful of tragedies, his productions nonetheless had a great impact on the history of reception: these are Aeschylus' *Persians*, *Seven Against Thebes* and *Oresteia*, Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* and Euripides' *Bacchae*. In his writing, instead of perpetuating the fantasy of tragedy's continuity with the past, popular at the time, he stressed that there is much we don't know about its form and context and can't connect to culturally; we have, therefore, to invent and re-imagine them. About his staging of *Seven Against Thebes* he wrote:

Greek theatre is a crossroads between East and West. In its ritual aspect it is influenced by the theatre of Asia. We cannot know what this ritual form was exactly. We can only suspect what it was like. So, with regard to performance, I instinctively felt the need to present a ritual that came out of something primitive, but also from [modern] Greek tradition and our contemporary life.<sup>117</sup>

(My own translation)

He also writes, thinking about the enigmatic elements of Aeschylus, such as the long monologues and long choral lyric:

All these [strange elements] have lead me to the belief that tragedy contains many ritual elements, which don't exist today in Western culture. They possibly exist in Asian or African culture, perhaps in [modern] Greek culture, but less so. [...] In short, I would never agree to ignore contemporary reality, because through [contemporary reality] I can come closer to the issues that inspired Aeschylus or the other tragedians, those

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<sup>117</sup> Koun (1987) 101.

issues that filled them with passion. And in this contemporary reality there exist those contemporary ritual elements that could be incorporated in a tragedy performance today. I will not hesitate to draw from African or Asian or any other ritual, because those are the only ones that are still alive in the world today.<sup>118</sup>

(My translation)

What Koun understood was the need to make the ancient unfamiliar elements, such as ritual, vital again for a contemporary audience, through contemporary parallels. Like Breuer and Telson, he borrowed from living traditions, but he did not create a world that was as close to reality as *Gospel at Colonus*. His world was still a product of the imagination, strange and theatrical, but containing echoes of contemporary religion and tradition that could resonate with the Greek audience.

His influence on the staging of the chorus internationally has often been stressed by academics. Marios Ploritis summarizes Koun's approach, connecting it with the Aristotelian 'hena tōn hypokritōn' in *Poetics* 1456a:

As an actor, Koun's chorus acts and suffers [...] In a collective that is shaken by suffering (pathos)—orchestrated either with satirical lyricism, as in the *Birds*, or orchestrated with poetic, dramatic quality (as in the *Persians*.) In Koun's chorus, each chorus member is one and is all—expressing the collective soul as well as the individual. The chorus in this case is not an 'annoying problem' (as usual), but a person that is irreplaceable, that constitutes that musical quintessence of drama, its lyrical transcendence.<sup>119</sup>

(My translation)

Koun's 1980 *Oresteia*<sup>120</sup> marked an aesthetic turning point for revivals of Greek drama in the period on which this thesis focuses. This monumental production of the whole trilogy, performed at Epidaurus, and revived again in 1982, found solutions to many of the contemporary problems surrounding the chorus, in a trilogy that includes particularly extensive choral parts. Finding contemporary cultural parallels for its more arcane aspects, he used the choral form as an opportunity for a rich and multi-dimensional theatrical experience. The chorus' communal identity and use of ritual were addressed

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<sup>118</sup> Koun (1987) 104-105.

<sup>119</sup> Ploritis (1987).

<sup>120</sup> Aeschylus *Oresteia*, translated by Thanasis Valtinos, directed by Karolos Koun, set and costume design by Dionysis Fotopoulos, music by Michalis Christodoulidis, Teatro Technis 1980-2. A video recording of the 1982 production can be viewed at the Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama in Oxford.

particularly successfully, while the approach to the chorus' behaviour combined the exploration of theatrical convention and psychological realism.

The Greek Orthodox liturgy, in sounds and movement, as well as folk tradition, was the basis of Koun's canvas. In order to realize the chorus, he borrowed images, shapes and sounds evoking mourning, church services and folk customs, from the traditions of contemporary Greece, Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean. In Koun's *Agamemnon*, the first stasimon, the prayer to Zeus, contains evocative sounds and rhythms from the Orthodox church, as well as echoes and shapes from traditional Greek dance such as *zeimbekiko*. The chorus-members kneel, gather in flocks, stretch out their arms to prayer. The lament after the king's death is a mixture of Byzantine church chanting and traditional lament. The movement, as in the *Persians*, is never uniform, but has an organic feel in its shape and in spatial configurations that is the result of improvisation in rehearsal. Of his 1965 production of the *Persians*, which followed a similar method and style in the choreography, he writes:

Furthermore, we avoided any fixed shape on stage, whether through rhythm or movement [...] That is we broke with formalism, because we believe that formalism is not a Greek element [...] In the expression of our people, in the *moiroloi* and in group lamentation [...] the possibility for spontaneous movement within the context of the ritual is often retained.<sup>121</sup>

The decorum and solemnity of the Byzantine tradition was a good match for the old men of Argos in *Agamemnon*, but in the *Choephoroi*, the female chorus of Eastern slaves, who engage in acts such as libation and necromancy, embodies more elements from folk ritual evocative of rural Greece but also of the Middle East. There is chanting, humming, ecstatic singing, trance-like movement, and strong evocation of traditional Greek lament.<sup>122</sup> During the lament at Agamemnon's tomb the chorus also use rattling instruments and their ecstatic movements, combined with their black costumes, with long cloaks and gossamer veils, create images of magic and the metaphysical. The effect is of a pagan ritual, but there are Orthodox elements in the imagery as well, such as the thin yellow candles in a square of sand, marking Agamemnon's tomb. The ritual effect is enhanced by the use of ancient Greek in one of the stasima, as Orestes exits to kill Clytemnestra. The element of ritual is less strong in the chorus of the *Eumenides*, in

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<sup>121</sup> Koun (1987) 66.

<sup>122</sup> On the ritual chorus of Koun's *Oresteia* see Varaki (2007) 267 and passim.



Koun's production. They wear deformed masks and their movement and hand gestures denote deformed bodies. The choreography is fast, evoking their hunt of Orestes, their movement staccato but erratic. Their high-pitched ghostly voices, and their singing combined with angry chanting, create an eerie atmosphere. The ritual element is strongest at the final, joyous exit song, which is a blessing of Athens. The music is uplifting to the Greek ear, and song is combined with chanted prayers and spoken lines. During this song the posture of the Erinyes changes: they straighten their backs, relax their hands and finally, as Athena speaks of the honours she will bestow upon them, they take off their deformed masks and their transformation is complete. This is the culmination of another set of rituals that runs as a theme in the *mise-en-scène* throughout the trilogy: the theatrical ritual of transformation through the use of mask and costume, that takes place before the audience. This was clearly signaled from the beginning of the *Agamemnon*, when the company enter, not yet in full costume, and during the prologue they sit and look towards the spectators. During the parodos fires are lit around the square playing area and the creation of ritual starts here, as the actors become the chorus before our eyes, by putting on their masks and cloaks. This sense of theatrical ritual continues throughout, as several characters come out of the chorus in all three plays. The dressing of Clytemnestra, which happens visibly in the palace doorway, is another emphatic expression of this set of rituals of 'taking on the role'.

Thus, in the *Oresteia*, the *mise-en-scène* revolved around creating a theatrical ritual in which to incorporate elements of traditional ritual acts, sounds, and movement. This emphasis on the ritual aspect of theatrical convention allowed Koun to create an imaginary world which retained a strong emotional resonance, particularly for a Greek contemporary audience, without becoming 'realistic' or too specific in the use of religious elements. The echoes of contemporary religious practice served to enhance a feeling of holiness, mysticism and absolute dedication to the enactment of an ancient myth by the tightly connected ensemble. Furthermore, the *mise-en-scène* also focused on the chorus as a form that allowed a deeper communion between the events enacted and the audience.

At the same time, the emphasis on emotional reality and the absence of stage effects for the sake of spectacle, proving that psychological realism was at the basis of the directorial approach, justified and strengthened the realization of collective behaviour and action, as an integral part of human behaviour and of human cultural context. Even the most text-heavy and poetic moments of the chorus were founded in emotional reality,

through the conditions created by the director, such as the given circumstances of lament or religious ritual, or the strong and evolving emotional bond with the protagonists. On the subject of realism in Koun's approach to Greek drama, Dimitris Maronitis writes:

Realism is the basis [of Koun's productions of Greek drama], while the imagination thrives in their structure. But the foundation of the performance is always real: as the imagination soars, the traces of the realistic starting point never fade away.<sup>123</sup>

(My translation)

## 5. Conclusion

Because tragedy is the drama of the city, of the state, linked inextricably to the socio-political and historical context within which it is produced, it calls for re-invention by its very nature. In ancient Athens the heart of the city beat in the theatre. The relationship between the chorus and the protagonist, between the community and the individual, eternally shifting, eternally problematic, eternally complex, reflected the city's tensions but remained diachronic, and eternally relevant to audiences and practitioners around the world, provided its dynamic is re-invented and re-captured within each different cultural framework.

I want to believe that there are many different ways to recreate chorality today. Maybe it is the act of coming together and actively participating in the group, submerging individuality to serve a common voice and purpose, sharing common cultural links, learning from the past in order to create bonds in the present. An exploration of the chorus along these lines has intense political and social significance and perhaps today, when the social relevance of art is questioned and artists are marginalized, it is more urgent than ever.

Aside from the political implications of staging the chorus today, there is great theatrical potential in its on-stage presence, perhaps in a sense even more exciting because of its strangeness, than it ever was in the original performance. So it seems that the question that is beginning to be formed is this: How can we today truly grasp the audience experience of watching choral performance in classical antiquity? And how can we then

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<sup>123</sup> Maronitis (1979).

begin to recreate this experience for the modern audience with authenticity and true dynamic?

We often talk about the problem of staging the chorus. I would like to slightly shift the focus: I feel that it is as much a problem of staging the chorus as it is of the audience experience of this element of the performance. This may seem as though I am stating the obvious. However, my aim in expressing the problem like this is to focus this discussion not on choral form but on the audience's experience of the chorus. In classical Athens this experience was defined by deep personal understanding, emotional and traditional bonds, a life-time of choral experience in education, religion and everyday life: this was an intense familiarity that historically preceded drama, it was a bond between audience and chorus so strong and multi-faceted that it defined their experience of the play in a way that is hard to imagine, let alone recreate, on the contemporary stage. I feel that a successful staging today should take into account this connection between audience and chorus, and generally the chorus' place in the cultural framework, by finding authentic and vital parallels in our own culture in which to re-discover the audience-chorus relationship in the original performance. Therefore, the next step should be to examine its original function in classical antiquity. By focusing on its role in performance, its impact on the audience, as well as on the technical aspects that govern its function, as much as we can, some insight can perhaps be gained to help our contemporary understanding. For the contemporary theatre artist, the constant examination of the relationship between form and content, especially when approaching Greek drama, is essential. On the other hand, each production of each play is different and happens for a different reason in a different context; thus the form will illuminate the content accordingly. For example, if the production's concept is rooted in truth and authenticity and seeking at the same time to stimulate the imagination, realism can be the basis of the play's emotional map, even for the chorus, but at the same time a freedom from convention is available to us, a spirit of experimentation that is the legacy of decades of fruitful exploration of the reception of Greek drama. This freedom is of essence in tragedy, if we see it as an evolving genre.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE CHORUS IN CLASSICAL ATHENS

#### 1. Introduction

‘...καὶ πολλὰς μεταβολὰς μεταβαλοῦσα ἡ τραγωδία ἐπαύσατο, ἐπεὶ ἔσχε τὴν αὐτῆς φύσιν...’

and after going through many changes, it stopped when it attained its proper nature.

*Aristotle Poetics* 1449a 14-15, transl. Csapo and Slater, 1994.

This famous passage the *Poetics*, speaking of the origins of tragedy, contains on the one hand the idea of its gradual development through ‘many changes’ as well as the contested notion that these changes stopped after a certain point, when tragedy acquired its ‘φύσις’, that is its ‘nature’, its ‘natural form’. Aristotle then lays out the theoretical framework of this form in the following paragraphs, and famously cites Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus* as the finest example of the genre. This passage contains the implication that something fundamental was fixed quite early on, with the input of Aeschylus, and of the other two great tragedians, crystallizing what was until then a fluid form; it may not be the number of actors or length of choral passages, but an imagined conscious theoretical framework, imposed anachronistically by Aristotle. In the last few decades, scholarship has moved away from such an assumption and put the emphasis more on the innovative tendencies in the genre and on a history of tragedy’s change and evolution throughout the classical period.

It is now widely held that Athenian tragedy, during its golden period of 5th century BCE, was an evolving genre. The three great tragedians have been described by scholars such as Oliver Taplin as great innovators, experimental artists who constantly reworked the conventions and aesthetics of performance. They also created these plays over a period of time that included significant changes and developments in politics, philosophy and ideology, which were reflected in the arts.

John Herington, in order to support this idea of the fluidity of the tragic form, draws a parallel between the shaping and evolution of Attic drama and the contribution to cinema of early film makers in the 20th century. He compares the impact of the technical invention of the camera, bringing with it rapid innovations and experimentation,

to Thespis' contribution to the evolution of tragedy, largely accepted by all, namely disguising his performers. Herington imagines Thespis' ground-breaking innovation sparking a period of great experimentation, in the same way that the first filmmakers explored the medium in a variety of ways. And like early film making, this new genre of tragedy in the decades that followed continued to evolve:

[O]nce tragedy had been born it continued to develop, surrounded by, influenced by, and in competition with, the chief poetic genres of the Hellenic song culture.<sup>124</sup>

I find this parallel with the 20th century a good starting-point. But we can also find evidence in antiquity of the tragedians continuing experimentation with the genre, perhaps none more famous than the second part of Aristophanes' *Frogs*, taken up by a dramatic poetry contest between Aeschylus and Euripides and often referred to as the earliest example of sustained literary criticism: its existence is a reminder that within Aristophanes' lifetime the genre of tragedy underwent several changes.

The implicit goal of these reflections on evolution is to show that a study of the original context of tragedy's performance as well as choral performance outside the theatre and how it evolved, will not lead to a rigid or 'orthodox' view of the theatrical function of the chorus, but instead may capture something of the spirit of the time, an era marked on the one hand by great artistic vitality and innovation, and on the other by a deep connection to tradition. Both these tendencies in Athenian cultural life are inextricably connected with the life of the *polis*, the democratic city, and tragedy was at the heart of the *polis*. This Athenian democracy was a new type of government, which revolutionized political and social life, while at the same time creating a strong base rooted in tradition, myth, and origins, to give the state credibility and durability as a new emerging power.

The collective of the chorus is at the heart of all these issues, influenced by and influencing all these forces. In the revolutionary new genre of tragedy, the chorus was the most ancient element, rooted in centuries-old traditions of poetry, dance and cult. At the same time, it underwent evolution and development with the input of each tragedian, which partly explains why its role is so difficult to define and its stage presence of such great variety. Viewed in this light, an understanding of its original context will liberate

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<sup>124</sup> Herington (1985) 99.

rather than limit the contemporary theatre practitioner, opening up a range of possibilities, hopefully providing creative inspiration. Some inherited misconceptions and rigid patterns formed by theatrical traditions of modern times, such as the ones mentioned in Chapter 2, will hopefully be proven to be irrelevant.

In the following paragraphs I will be reviewing some of the most important ancient evidence for the tragic chorus as well as scholarly contributions, roughly since the late 70s, after Taplin's seminal work helped re-focus our view of the genre, emphasizing its theatrical dimension.<sup>125</sup> The evidence falls roughly into the following categories, which are always of course interconnected: the origins of tragedy; the identity of the chorus and its role in what constitutes a tragic plot; its place within the cultural landscape of classical Athens, with reference to politics, society, economy and religion; its ritual function; and finally, what we know of the actual theatrical presentation, the song-and-dance that made up choral performance.

## 2. Origins

In a discussion of the Greek chorus, whether philological or theatrical, the question of the origins of tragedy inevitably comes up. Chorus and origins are interconnected in scholarship since Aristotle's *Poetics*. It is worth looking at the relevant passage again in its entirety:

γενομένη δ' οὖν ἀπ' ἀρχῆς αὐτοσχεδιαστικῆς—καὶ αὐτὴ καὶ ἡ κωμῳδία, καὶ ἡ μὲν ἀπὸ τῶν ἐξαρχόντων τὸν διθύραμβον, ἡ δὲ ἀπὸ τῶν τὰ φαλλικά ἃ ἔτι καὶ νῦν ἐν πολλαῖς τῶν πόλεων διαμένει νομιζόμενα—κατὰ μικρὸν ηὐξήθη προαγόντων ὅσον ἐγένετο φανερόν αὐτῆς: καὶ πολλὰς μεταβολὰς μεταβαλοῦσα ἡ τραγωδία ἐπαύσατο, ἐπεὶ ἔσχε τὴν αὐτῆς φύσιν. καὶ τό τε τῶν ὑποκριτῶν πλῆθος ἐξ ἑνὸς εἰς δύο πρῶτος Αἰσχύλος ἤγαγε καὶ τὰ τοῦ χοροῦ ἡλάττωσε καὶ τὸν λόγον πρωταγωνιστεῖν παρεσκεύασεν: τρεῖς δὲ καὶ σκηνογραφίαν Σοφοκλῆς.

<Tragedy> arising from improvisation—both it and comedy, tragedy from those who 'led off the dithyramb', comedy from those <who led off> the phallic songs, which still remain the custom of many of our cities even now- grew gradually as they developed each aspect that came to light; and after going through many changes, it stopped when it attained its proper nature. Aeschylus first raised the number of the actors from one to two

<sup>125</sup> It should be noted here that what Taplin did for tragedy, namely to view it from a theatrical instead of a philological perspective, was preceded and influenced by the studies on Aristophanic comedy by Solomos (1974) and Russo (1962).

and reduced the choral element and gave the leading role to the spoken part. Sophocles <invented> three <actors> and scene-painting.

Aristotle *Poetics* 1449a 10-18, transl. Csapo and Slater, 1994.

This is the passage in which tragedy is said to have evolved from a form of choral performance called the *dithyramb*, a circular chorus of fifty accompanied by the *aulos*. For years we have imagined one of the performers, perhaps Thespis, separating himself from the dithyrambic chorus in a moment of inspiration and starting to speak in a solo voice, in conversation and in opposition to the choral collective, thus sparking an artistic revolution that led to the beginning of drama. Much scholarly energy has been devoted to the question of origins, giving rise to a variety of theories. I feel that today we probably cannot, through the extant evidence, reach a definitive conclusion, but the possibilities put forth by scholars from the basic schools of thought, as well as the evidence they use, can open up new paths of creativity for the practitioner.

A brief, general overview of the possible origins and influences of Greek drama that have drawn the attention of scholars is provided by Rush Rehm:

[C]ontemporary ritual, including funeral lamentation, hero cults, and initiation rites; early forms of artistic performance, including song, dance, poetry, and Homeric recitation [...]; Dionysiac worship, ranging from folkdances linked with the harvest to ritualized impersonation, from drunken revels to formal initiation into the Dionysiac mysteries; anthropological paradigms, such as the worship of a cyclical year-god who suffers, dies and comes back to life with the changing seasons; intellectual, spiritual, and creative energies cohering in a 'tragic' vision, epitomized in Nietzsche's brilliantly speculative *The Birth of Tragedy*; or political and cultural forces aimed at promoting civic loyalty, democratic ideology and social cohesion.<sup>126</sup>

Reading this overview, we may be led to think that perhaps it was a combination of influences, and the dithyramb had something to do with it originally. In any case, our evidence of the cultural framework shows that it is first of all very useful to consider tragedy's connection with earlier forms of choral performance: ancient Greek poetry performance culture preceded, influenced and remained a contemporary of tragedy during antiquity. Secondly, I would like to consider the basic schools of thought supporting ritual, sacrifice and cult as having played a crucial role in the creation of tragedy. I will

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<sup>126</sup> Rehm (2004) 11.

concentrate on origins here, saving a more extensive discussion of the ritual and religious function of the chorus in the plays in the relevant section later on in this chapter.

In 1910 William Ridgeway put forth the theory that tragedy originated in the lament performed by a chorus worshipping a dead hero at his tomb.<sup>127</sup> This theory, like the ‘Cambridge school’ theory that placed ritual at the origins of all myth and its narration or enactment, has subsequently been attacked by many scholars. Although this extreme anthropological view is rarely endorsed anymore, scholars are still interested in ritual and have found fruitful, if less extreme, ways to connect it with drama. More recent and less outdated theories related to ritual and hero-cult respectively are Burkert’s and Seaford’s.

Walter Burkert’s work puts sacrifice at the heart of Greek religion, cult and drama.<sup>128</sup> He disputes the theory that the origin of the name τραγῳδία means ‘song of goats’ and refers to a singing performance of dancers dressed as goats, but instead puts forward the theory that at the heart of the original performance was the sacrifice of a goat.<sup>129</sup>

Goat sacrifice deserves to be taken seriously: it leads back to the depths of pre-historic human development, as well as into the centre of tragedy.<sup>130</sup>

His evidence is anthropological, archaeological and literary/linguistic, based on the plays themselves. According to this theory the sacrifice of a goat was probably performed by the winners in a dramatic contest. Burkert thinks it highly probable that the thymele (θυμέλη), the characteristic centre of the orchestra, was an altar, since the word is derived from the word θύειν- to sacrifice. With a close reading of the plays he shows how sacrifice is the thematic link between tragedy, myth and ancient cult.<sup>131</sup> The anthropological basis of his work is quite compelling, and interesting for the theatrical interpretation of the plays, as he emphasizes the importance of killing, hunting and sacrifice in the history of human evolution. He admits, however, that the discussion of the origins of tragedy is a ‘field of basic ambiguity’ in which ‘not even Thespis himself could have given final elucidation.’<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Ridgeway (1910).

<sup>128</sup> Walter Burkert’s influential work on this issue is *Homo necans: The anthropology of ancient Greek sacrificial ritual and myth* (1983). See also Burkert (1966) and (2001).

<sup>129</sup> Burkert (2001) 2-4.

<sup>130</sup> Burkert (1966) 121.

<sup>131</sup> Burkert (1966) 121.

<sup>132</sup> Burkert (2001) 1.



Amplifying Ridgeway's Edwardian hypothesis that tragedy originated in the laments at heroes' tombs,<sup>133</sup> Richard Seaford's work discusses the questions of the origins of tragedy in connection with the Eleusinian mysteries and hero cult.<sup>134</sup> He notes that the tragedians, as well as many members of the audience, were themselves initiated in the mystic cult of Demeter in Eleusis, whose structure and imagery bore many resemblances to drama. For example, the Mysteries included the enactment of a myth, with structural elements such as suffering, lamentation, reversal, and enlightenment, as well as visual effects such as the use of torch light. In the same work Seaford also finds parallels between drama, the Mysteries and hero-cult, through stimulating discussions of *Ajax*, *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Bacchae* as aetiological myths for the foundation of cult.<sup>135</sup>

Alongside the scholarly exploration that looks for tragedy's origin in ritual and religion, with choral performance at the heart of it, another idea develops, sometimes stated clearly and sometimes just taken for granted or implied. This is the view of the chorus' history as one of reduction, from the birth of tragedy onwards: most people agree that the chorus is connected to the origins of tragedy, but 'falls by the wayside' as the genre becomes more developed and sophisticated. Crucial to this idea is Aristotle's statement that Aeschylus' innovation was to increase the number of actors from one to two and to *reduce the chorus*, (τὰ τοῦ χοροῦ ἡλάττωσε) while making λόγος, the verbal element, a *protagonist* (τὸν λόγον πρωταγωνιστεῖν παρεσκεύασεν). (Ar. *Poet.* 1449a.16-17.)

Inspired by Aristotle, Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* (1872) reaches the conclusion that tragedy originated in the chorus, but then the choral element was gradually reduced with the development of the dramatic elements. Here we find his famous duality through which he defines tragedy: first came the chorus and music, the Dionysiac elements, and then came speech and dialogue, the Apollonian elements. What emerges is a history of tragedy's development as a gradual reduction of the Dionysiac element, musical, ecstatic, irrational, cultic, as the Apollonian element or rationality, verbal expression and individual characterization, becomes more prominent and more sophisticated. The intimate connection between theatre and Dionysus has also

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<sup>133</sup> Ridgeway (1910).

<sup>134</sup> Seaford (1994) 275-288.

<sup>135</sup> Seaford's emphasis on ritual and cult and its relationship to drama structurally and in terms of content has also given us some interesting insights in terms of the perversion of ritual by dramatists. See in particular Seaford (1985).

led other scholars to suggest that ritual transvestism in the Dionysiac cult, or maenadism and the Dionysiac thiasos, were instrumental in the emergence of the genre.<sup>136</sup>

This theory has had a lasting influence, especially in relation to the old debate on whether tragedy originated in ritual. Although the word *ritual* is not explicitly mentioned by Nietzsche, his description of the Dionysian element, with its deeply cultic atmosphere, creates an impression of a linear progression from choral, religious, ritual practice, in which Dionysus is the original hero, towards extant Greek drama as we know it. The implication is, of course, that a chorus with ritual function is the distant model for the dramatic chorus of Attic tragedy; and that the chorus, even when Aeschylus was writing, was an ancient relic from the past. Naturally this would mean that the chorus' history is one of decline from the very beginning.<sup>137</sup>

In conclusion, the discussion of tragedy's origins has two major implications for the character and function of the chorus. The first is the ritual dimension, which will be further discussed in Section 5 of this chapter. Whether or not a definite answer can be given in terms of cultic origins, the study of the chorus through this lens has yielded powerful results, and has also had great resonance with certain theatre practitioners interested in ritual since the late 1960s. Such contemporary revivals will be the main focus of Chapter 4 of this thesis.

The second implication is that the history of the chorus is one of reduction. It is understandable that classicists but also contemporary theatre practitioners should feel that the chorus is 'getting in the way' of theatre's historical progression towards psychological truth and humanist plots, since the 'Apollonian' element of tragedy—individual characterization, dialogue, and so forth—is closer to our own notion of what constitutes drama but also philosophically closer to our modern world. But this is an unhelpful starting point for the practitioner, since it views the chorus as a problem rather than an opportunity. In this thesis, discussing tragedy revivals by the theatrical avant-garde, we will often focus on the chorus' potential in a genre of contemporary theatre where psychological realism is no longer the overriding aesthetic goal.

What I hope to show in the following sections, is that instead of a cumbersome relic of an archaic art form, the chorus is is a vibrant, exciting, multi-faceted and ideologically significant element of Greek drama.

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<sup>136</sup> See below pp.88, 92 and 113 on Zeitlin's work and also e.g. Hoffman (1989) and Segal (1997).

<sup>137</sup> For the history of the chorus as one of reduction see Csapo and Slater (1994) pp. 349 ff.

### 3. Who are they? Character, communal identity, the tragic.

As discussed in Chapter 2, our contemporary understanding of the chorus is fraught with difficulties due to the cultural chasm between 5<sup>th</sup>-century Athens and modern Western society. As a result, the simple question ‘Who are they?’ cannot be answered in a direct, uncomplicated way conveying all facets of the original Greek chorus. Frequently we start answering this question with a negative: They are not like the chorus in an opera, they are not like the chorus in a musical, they are not a church choir. So what do we know about who they are?

The initial meaning of the word *χορός* in Greek is dance, according to the Liddell-Scott-Jones Lexicon. It can also mean a group engaged in singing and dancing, the place where the dancing takes place, and, finally, it refers of course to the dramatic chorus, or any group engaged in choral performance: that is singing and dancing in a group, whether in a play, or in a religious festival in honour of a god, or in a competition of choral performance.

What we know of the dramatic chorus is that they were a group of at least twelve male performers in masks, who danced while singing elaborate poetry between scenes of the play and also at times during the action. Their physical presence on stage and their interaction with the main characters is part of the plot: therefore, they are actually dramatic persons who are present in the same fictional time and space as the characters (mythical Thebes during the reign of Oedipus, Argos during the regime of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra etc.) and can interact with them. However, there were some crucial differences in terms of the use of space by the chorus and main characters in the ancient theatre, which in turn influenced the extent of their agency and their connection to the plot.

The dramatic chorus was spatially confined to the part of the theatre called the *orchestra*, the ‘dancing place’ (the term *χορός* for dancing place is more often used for a place in the city where dancing takes place, rather than in the theatre).<sup>138</sup> By contrast, the characters are usually on the *skene*, the stage building, an area upstage of the orchestra and raised. The ancient sources connect the actors to the *skene*, using the word both

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<sup>138</sup> See Lonsdale (1993). The book contains an anthropological analysis of dance in ancient Greece, its place in community life and the special importance of the dancing place, *χορός*, in a city, as a symbol of peace, wealth and prosperity.

literally and metaphorically.<sup>139</sup> Pollux states that actors and chorus were spatially separated, in the skene and orchestra respectively.<sup>140</sup> The chorus almost never leave the orchestra, either to exit or to go inside the *skene* building. This is a very well-known convention. It is broken only a few times in extant tragedy, such as in the much discussed scene in Sophocles' *Ajax*. In lines 813-14, after Tekmessa's request to help find Ajax, the chorus respond:

χωρεῖν ἔτοιμος, κοῦ λόγῳ δείξω μόνον·  
τάχος γὰρ ἔργου καὶ ποδῶν ἅμ' ἔψεται

I am ready to help, and I will show it in more than word.  
Speed of action and speed of foot will follow together

Sophocles' *Ajax*, ll 813-14, transl. Richard Jebb (1893)

At this point they actually leave the orchestra in search for Ajax, and this unusual behaviour is underlined self-referentially: κοῦ λόγῳ δείξω μόνον. Immediately there is a scene change, Ajax enters alone, in a remote part of the shore, carrying a sword, intending to commit suicide.<sup>141</sup> The chorus never get to him in time to stop him.

What I find most interesting in this convention of the chorus' confinement to the orchestra (which, when it is broken, it is for a reason instrumental to the plot) is the tragedians' manipulation of it, which again suggests, in my opinion, a spirit of experimentation with regard to the chorus during the 5th century. In extant tragedy this happens five times, which I would like to briefly discuss here.<sup>142</sup>

The chorus' exit is sometimes accompanied by a scene change as in *Ajax*, but other times it takes place in order to allow for the important arrival of a new character. In Aeschylus' *Eumenides* the chorus exit in 231, to chase after Orestes who has escaped them while they slept. The scene changes from Delphi to Athens, where Orestes has come as a suppliant, and the chorus return in 299 to hunt him down. In Euripides' *Alcestis* the chorus exit in 746, with Admetus and Alcestis' funeral procession. They return after

<sup>139</sup> See especially Plato's *Laws* 817c, Plutarch *Demetrius* 44, Demosthenes *On the Crown* 180.

<sup>140</sup> Poll.4.123

<sup>141</sup> Pollux has a term, μετὰστασις, for the chorus' withdrawal from the orchestra during the play, while their return he calls ἐπιπαρόδος, (Poll.4.108.), a second entrance song.

<sup>142</sup> On the transformation of theatrical space effected by the chorus leaving the orchestra see Rehm (2002) 123-124. On the dramaturgical significance of exits and entrances in extant tragedies, including those of the chorus, see Taplin [1978] (2003) 21-40.

Alcestis' funeral, with Admetus, in 861. Here there is no scene change, but while they are gone an unexpected guest arrives at the palace, Herakles, who will reverse the fate of the household. Similarly, in Euripides' *Helen* the chorus and Helen exit at 385, to allow for the unexpected arrival of Menelaus, feared dead by Helen, setting up the scene for a great amount of tragic irony when Helen and the chorus re-enter in 515. The impact of the recognition scene is thus maximized, since Menelaus had entered and revealed himself to the audience while no-one else was present on stage. Euripides knows how exciting it is, at any given moment in the play, for the audience to know more than the actors or chorus. In *Rhesus*, attributed to Euripides, dawn is breaking in lines 564 ff, while the chorus of guards, tired from the night's watch, wait for the next shift to come and relieve them. Since their successors have not arrived yet, the chorus decide to go and rouse them themselves. Thus the stage, which is the Trojan camp outside Hector's tent, remains empty, allowing for the stealthy arrival of Odysseus and Diomedes, who will of course change the turn of events by killing Rhesus before he can help the Trojan army. The chorus re-enter in 675, in confusion and shouting, to capture the intruders, but Odysseus manages to trick them and the two Greeks slip away. These examples show the tragedians, and especially Euripides, experimenting with the ability or inability of the chorus to influence the turn of events, as well as with the impact of their dramatic identity and their physical presence in the space on the development of the plot. These exits and entrances are theatrically exciting, they reverse expectations and they seem to explore and expand the chorus' dramaturgical significance.

Perhaps the most meta-dramatic, or self-referential, exploration of the chorus' spatial containment and limitation in agency, comes in Euripides' *Cyclops*. In this satyr play, Euripides builds dramatic tension around the chorus' inability to act, in a humorous way, but also uses the convention as an opportunity for some political commentary. In line 475 and again in 597 the chorus promise to go 'inside', which in this play is the Cyclops' cave, to help Odysseus blind Polyphemus. Just when the moment comes when they should act, since Polyphemus is finally asleep, they start putting forward ridiculous excuses and refusing to play their part in the attack, due to cowardice and self-interest (635 ff). Odysseus makes some politically charged comments on the people's eternal fickleness (643 and 649-653) and goes inside to blind the Cyclops alone. The audience knew that the chorus of satyrs would most likely never leave the orchestra, much less physically influence the turn of events, but this argument with Odysseus comes at a

pivotal moment in the drama, to heighten dramatic tension—and perhaps to make an implied political comment.<sup>143</sup>

In terms of text, the chorus have a wide range of options. They exchange lines of dialogue with the main characters of the drama, either in the form of brief comments on the events or as whole scenes. They also sing or dance alone on stage or in a scene with a main character. Their commentary and songs often have a philosophical character which may put the dramatic events in a wider context. This ability, combined with their selflessness and equanimity in comparison to the hero, and their strong empathy for what happens on stage, has led to the famous definition by Schlegel of the chorus as ‘the ideal spectator’.<sup>144</sup> Schlegel was influenced by a passage in the peripatetic text *Problemata* attributed to Aristotle, ([Aristotle], *Problems* 19.48), which draws a clear class distinction between chorus and protagonists:

Why do the choruses in tragedy not sing either in the Hypodorian or in the Hypophrygian mode? Is it because these modes have very little of the kind of tune which is specially necessary to a chorus? Now the Hypophrygian mode has a character of action [...] and the Hypodorian is magnificent and steadfast [...] Now both these are unsuited to the chorus and more proper for the characters on the stage; for the latter imitate heroes, and among the ancients the leaders alone were heroes, and the people, of whom the chorus consists, were mere men. So a woeful and quiet character and type of music are suited to the chorus, for they are more human.

It goes on to say:

When we use the Hypodorian and Hypophrygian modes, on the other hand, we are active, and action is not fitting for choruses; for the chorus is in attendance and takes no active part, for it simply shows goodwill towards those with whom it is present.

[Aristotle] *Problems* 19.48, transl. W.D. Ross, 1927

In this passage we have some generalizations regarding the chorus that, viewed absolutely, can be misleading, and do feel anachronistic: first the class distinction between chorus and protagonists and secondly, a definite statement about their inability

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<sup>143</sup> On Euripides’ exploitation of the conventions of tragedy, including the chorus’ spatial limitations, see Arnott (1973).

<sup>144</sup> Schlegel (1846) 76-77.

to act. Finally, these reflections lead to the root of the theory of the ideal spectator: the chorus are a group of lower class characters dependant upon the hero, simply ‘in attendance’ and simply showing goodwill towards the main characters.

The definition of ideal spectator has of course been widely rejected, the main objection being the use of dramatic irony by the playwrights: the chorus is often, like the protagonists, in a state of ignorance or misunderstanding of the events, knowing less of the truth than the audience through their too-close involvement with the plot. This will lead them to misjudge what is happening at a crucial moment, thus heightening the dramatic effect. Moreover, Aristotle’s albeit sparse discussion of the chorus in the *Poetics* is at odds with Schlegel’s notion of ‘the ideal spectator’. The following passage may offer some insight:

καὶ τὸν χορὸν δὲ ἓνα δεῖ ὑπολαμβάνειν τῶν ὑποκριτῶν, καὶ μόνον εἶναι  
τοῦ ὅλου καὶ συναγωνίζεσθαι μὴ ὥσπερ Εὐριπίδῃ ἀλλ’ ὥσπερ Σοφοκλεῖ.

Aristotle *Poetics* 1456a, 26-27

This passage defines the chorus as ‘one of the actors’, rather than a wise observer or an ‘ideal spectator’. Moreover, it has two implications that have received a lot of attention over the years: that the chorus is a group functioning as one, and secondly that for Aristotle the chorus is integral to tragedy.

The chorus then have a communal identity. They usually refer to themselves in the first person singular.<sup>145</sup> Although we may theoretically understand what this means, it is really hard to grasp fully this degree of submission to the group, or identification with a communal voice, so alien to our modern culture. We have already seen in Chapter 2 how this is one of the main stumbling blocks for contemporary production. It is however one of the most important ingredients of Attic drama. This continuous presence of a community with high stakes in the action, always witnessing the events with deep emotional involvement, is necessary for the realization of the tragic element in the plays.

At this point I would like to look at the opposing but equally useful arguments by John Gould and Simon Goldhill on the collective voice and how it relates to the experience of the tragic. To summarize briefly, Gould in his article ‘Tragedy and the Collective Experience’ in the book *Tragedy and the Tragic* emphasizes the chorus’ social

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<sup>145</sup> At certain crucial moments they switch to the plural, as very well discussed by Kaimio (1970).

marginality, while Goldhill in his article in the same book entitled ‘Collectivity and Otherness—The Authority of the Tragic Chorus: Response to Gould’, and also elsewhere in his work, emphasizes the chorus’ authority.<sup>146</sup> Perhaps choral identity is realized somewhere in between these two poles.

I will begin with Gould and his observations regarding the chorus’ fictive identity in the drama. As we know, there are a variety of fictive identities, but in the majority of cases these are identities of socially marginalized groups: non-citizen, female, disenfranchised, slaves, exiles, old and unfit for war. Such groups have a very marginal, or non-existent role in the political functions of the city-state. For this reason, Gould goes against the theory that identifies the chorus with the collective citizen body in opposition to the individual heroic voice of the protagonist.

Since the citizen body is sitting in the theatre watching the performance, Gould defines the voice of the chorus as the voice of Otherness. They express the experience quite dissimilar to that of the majority of the audience: the experience of the excluded and the oppressed—Trojan female slaves, foreign suppliants, old men left behind during a war—not of the collective powerful voice of the citizenry. They are nonetheless a collective and anonymous experience, in opposition to the heroic voice, which is individual and has a name. He supports this view with examples from several plays, showing how different choruses relate completely differently to the protagonists as well as to the place.

Another crucial observation is that the playwright chooses the fictive identity of the chorus himself, with great care. This identity is an element of plot development and sheds light on the playwright’s own interpretation of a well-known myth. This choice may be suggested by the myth itself to varying degrees, but since the chorus is an element of the drama, not of the myth, the final choice lies with the playwright. It seems, then, that the choice of a fictive identity for the chorus is essential for a unique and innovative dramatic rendering of a story already existing within the audience’s shared traditional knowledge.<sup>147</sup> Thus the chorus is a character whose presence is justified within the action of the play—as Aristotle would have it.

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<sup>146</sup> On the authority of the chorus’ voice see also Goldhill (2007) 53-54.

<sup>147</sup> On the choice of fictive identity for the chorus see also Foley (2003) 7-8. Connecting the success of a play with the chorus’ virtuosity and impressive stage presence, she observes that Aeschylus’s extant choruses are spectacular, unusual and exotic, that Sophocles, who uses predominantly male choruses, makes up for it by writing for them a higher proportion of exciting lyric dialogues with the actors, and that Euripides, while he reduced the volume of choral lyric, preferred female and foreign choruses and ‘new music’, both of which contributed to a more spectacular performance.



The other important observation, especially with regard to the *mise-en-scène*, is that this constant presence in the orchestra of a collective witness whose fate depends on the action adds great pressure on the events unfolding and on the protagonists. The chorus' emotional involvement and reaction at every turn elevates the importance of what happens from the domestic sphere to the realm of the tragic.

In addition to their physical presence, they are able to contextualize the tragic through their utterance: in their songs they evoke a wider community, through what Gould calls the 'inherited wisdom of social memory'. This is of course referring to their extensive repertoire of mythical stories relating in some way to the plot, which makes up most of the choral odes and which gives a broader perspective on the actions of the hero.

This communal wisdom, founded on the ancient knowledge of myth, and shared by chorus and audience, is exactly where Goldhill finds his argument against Gould's 'social marginality'. For Goldhill this is exactly the point: the chorus have an ability to sing about myth, thus giving a frame of reference and a universal context for the events. That means that their utterance carries knowledge and wisdom, through the authority of myth. The importance of myth for Athenian culture cannot be overrated. To say the least, it made up the narrative and emotional context in which the audience watched the drama unfold. Myth unifies the two collectives: that of the audience and that of the chorus. According to Goldhill, this must give the chorus some authority. It is a religious and moral authority, which is further enhanced by their communal voice. This function plays a pivotal role in tragic drama.

In *How to Stage Greek Tragedy Today* Goldhill elaborates further on this idea of the chorus' authoritative utterance and insists on the chorus' being necessary for the experience of the tragic. The chorus is not just a formal or aesthetic element related to the culture and tradition of ancient Greece. On the contrary, this tension between the individual hero and the collective chorus is a fundamental shaping principle for Greek drama:

The hero, especially in Sophocles, is a figure who makes the boundaries of normal life problematic: the hero goes too far...The greatness of the hero is achieved at the expense of his ability to fit into normal social parameters. The hero is often destroyed—or destroys himself—in the pursuit of his own goals, and this passionate self-belief is set in juxtaposition to the cooperative virtues of the community. The community finds the hero both transfixing and horrific [...]The chorus stands for and

dramatizes a communal voice, which is set against the hero's individualism.<sup>148</sup>

This thesis will return to this aspect of the discussion, i.e. the dramaturgical significance of the communal voice, frequently. If as theatre practitioners we are to try to find better ways of staging the chorus, we should first become convinced of the necessity of its presence on stage in order for the play to be fully realized. As for the apparent discrepancy between the chorus' communal voice of moral authority and its characterization as a marginalized group, as 'the other', perhaps it should not be so bewildering. Perhaps it expands the humanity and universality of the plays. The chorus through this dual role can evoke both the Athenian polis with its traditions, myth, ideology, morality, as well as the voice of the oppressed, the disenfranchised, the weak, and this is perhaps far more effective for the impact of the drama on the audience. Both these roles can have a huge emotional power. How do we imagine the original audience reacted to the chorus of *Trojan Women* for example? Were they less moved by their plight or less involved in the debate intellectually because the chorus were foreign, female, and belonging to a distant mythical past? I don't think anyone would assume that. We know that Athenian democracy was a new regime dictating a new social order and imperialist agenda, with its own internal tensions. In the theatrical arena many of these tensions are played out, including for example gender conflict and the necessity of war. Furthermore, the tension between the individual, who ultimately fails, and the voice of the community fits in the ideology of the new democratic polis. The combination of authority and marginality of the chorus fits in with both these themes in Attic drama.

In Chapter 5 we will return to this political and social aspect of the chorus, with a closer discussion of choral identity and agency and specific reference to contemporary 'political' revivals, in which the chorus play an instrumental role in meaning and plot development. In the same chapter we will also examine evidence that undermines the notion that the history of the chorus is necessarily one of reduction.

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<sup>148</sup> Goldhill (2007) 47.

#### 4. The civic context

Κλεόκριτος δὲ ὁ τῶν μυστῶν κῆρυξ, μάλ' εὖφωνος ὢν, κατασιωπησάμενος ἔλεξεν: Ἄνδρες πολῖται, τί ἡμᾶς ἐξελαύνετε; τί ἀποκτεῖναι βούλεσθε; ἡμεῖς γὰρ ὑμᾶς κακὸν μὲν οὐδὲν πώποτε ἐποιήσαμεν, μετεσχίκαμεν δὲ ὑμῖν καὶ ἱερῶν τῶν σεμνοτάτων καὶ θυσιῶν καὶ ἑορτῶν τῶν καλλίστων, καὶ συγχορευταὶ καὶ συμφοιτηταὶ γεγενήμεθα καὶ συστρατιῶται, καὶ πολλὰ μεθ' ὑμῶν κεκινδυνεύκαμεν καὶ κατὰ γῆν καὶ κατὰ θάλατταν ὑπὲρ τῆς κοινῆς ἀμφοτέρων ἡμῶν σωτηρίας τε καὶ ἐλευθερίας.

And Cleocritus, a herald of the initiated, who had a very fine voice, obtained silence and said: 'Fellow citizens, why do you drive us out of the city? Why do you want to kill us? For we never did you any harm, but we have shared with you in the most solemn rites, in sacrifices, and in the most splendid festivals, we have joined in choral dances with you, gone to school with you, and been comrades in arms, bracing together the dangers of land and sea in defense of our common safety and freedom.'

Xen. *Hell.* 2.4, 20 (transl. Carleton L. Brownson)

In this passage Xenophon imagines the speech of the herald Cleocritus in the context of civil war in Athens, a few decades after the period we are discussing. Trying to appeal to the enemies, who are fellow Athenians, the herald paints a picture of solidarity in the city's recent past, and reminds his audience of the bonds that join the parties who are now at war: religious rites and festivals, education, military campaigns to defend their city during the Peloponnesian war, and taking part together in choral performance. This passage very effectively places the chorus in the context of the civic life of Athens. Choral performance, whether dramatic or not, was a crucial part of citizen life, being an expression of the individual's bonds with the community. But the genre of tragedy, being an Athenian invention, is especially linked to politics, ideology and the experience of being an Athenian citizen in the classical period.

Attic drama was always produced at specific times each year as part of a major religious festival with strong socio-political connotations. This civic context has been greatly emphasized by scholars in recent years, in such important works as *Nothing to Do with Dionysus? Athenian Drama in its Social Context*.<sup>149</sup> This is of great interest for the

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<sup>149</sup> Winkler and Zeitlin (1990).

current thesis, since some crucial but bewildering traits of the collective voice of the chorus can be illuminated when viewed within this social, political and ideological framework.

Peter Wilson gives one of the most extensive accounts for the civic and historical context for choral performance.<sup>150</sup> Through a detailed analysis of all the evidence we have for the institution of the *khoregia*, which was the funding of a dramatic chorus by a private, wealthy individual, a vivid picture emerges with the chorus at the centre of a complex web of ideological, economic, social and political influences. Wilson's stated goal in this study is to merge the theatrical and political history of Greek drama: the discussion and evidence revolve around two central cultural facets of classical Athens. On the one hand we have the fundamental importance of *khoreia* in Athenian pedagogy. *Khoreia* is defined as the practice of dancing and singing as a social collective to the words and music of a poet.<sup>151</sup> This famous passage from Plato's *Laws* is often cited with reference to the importance of *khoreia*:

οὐκοῦν ὁ μὲν ἀπαίδευτος ἀχόρευτος ἡμῖν ἔσται, τὸν δὲ πεπαιδευμένον  
ἱκανῶς κεχορευκότα θετέον;

Shall we assume that the uneducated man is without chorus training, and  
the educated man fully chorus-trained?

Plato *Laws* 654a-b

Socrates proposes, and his interlocutor agrees, that the uneducated man is without chorus training, whereas the educated man is well-trained in choruses. But Wilson also provides more literary and archaeological evidence that shows that this is not an exaggeration of Plato's, but in complete agreement with Athenian tradition.

On the other hand, we have the *leitourgiai*, the public services which were so fundamental for the structure of Athenian democracy. The *khoregia* was one of the most important democratic public services, on a par with the private funding for the fleet, in terms of prestige and perceived importance for the state. Whereas every other aspect of the performance of a Greek drama was state-funded, the funding of the chorus, the costliest part of the production, was the honourable duty of a wealthy and high-profile individual citizen. In Wilson's introduction we read, regarding this institution: 'there were

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<sup>150</sup> Wilson (2000).

<sup>151</sup> Wilson (2000) 5.

few public activities in the realm of the social and cultural that carry so much privilege and prestige as having, giving, receiving, teaching or leading a tragic *khōros*.<sup>152</sup> We will see that from Wilson's analysis there emerges a constant tension, on a practical as well as symbolic level, between the notions of the chorus/the collective/the city and the individual/the *khoregos*/the aristocratic benefactor.

The other stated goal of the book, which runs parallel and is implicit in all the evidence, is to challenge the misconception, inspired by Aristotle, that the history of tragedy is a history of decline of the chorus. Wilson supports that contrary to the *Poetics*, Athenians viewed tragedy as choral performance; and that the absence of the *polis* context from the *Poetics* constitutes a huge gap in the theoretical analysis of the nature of the genre and of the chorus in particular.

In the first part of Wilson's book the evidence for the *khoregia* as an institution within the context of the city's festivals is laid out and interpreted. His conclusion, drawn from a variety of textual and archaeological evidence, is that the security of the city's choral culture was as important as that of its naval power, the backbone of the city's military strength, since it received the same amount of institutional support. The connection with the theme of war continues further and deeper. Wilson underlines what he calls 'militaristic concerns'<sup>153</sup> in Athenian drama, which are apparent not only thematically in the plays themselves but also in the festival context and in the organisation of the public service of the *khoregia*. The activity of the dramatic chorus itself is taken as further evidence to support the military connection, as the dancing of the chorus is likened to an army drill,<sup>154</sup> with its 'encouraged skill of orderliness, obedience and co-ordination, as well as physical fitness, which would serve the hoplite in the phalanx'.<sup>155</sup>

The evidence presented on the organisation and operation of the *khoregia* reveals the impressive scale of state involvement and public prominence that went with it. Aristotle's *Constitution of the Athenians* 56.3 tells us that the appointment of the *khoregoi*, the sponsors of the chorus, began very far in advance and was the responsibility and the first official piece of business of the *archon*, the highest official of the state.

The *khoregoi* provided for everything, from the beginning of rehearsals many months before the festival, through to the actual performance. They devoted so much

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<sup>152</sup> Wilson (2000) 2.

<sup>153</sup> Wilson (2000) 47.

<sup>154</sup> On the issue of the military character of the role and movement of the chorus see also Winkler (1990).

<sup>155</sup> Wilson (2000) 46-47. For a sociological analysis of the importance of religion, army training and dance in creating social bonds see McNeil (1997).

time, energy and money in hopes that they would be honoured through a first place at the festival. The number, place of display, and lavishness of the archaeological evidence monumentalizing a *khoregos*' victory shows that such a victory was one of the highest honours a citizen could receive. There is no doubting the extremely competitive nature of this institution then, further supported by the relevant court cases, laws, and other written documentation, as well as by the archaeological evidence of curses and spells that the *khoregoi* put against each other.

Ancient sources commenting on this distinctly Athenian cultural phenomenon, the glory, competitiveness and huge expenditure associated with the theatre, are struck by the fact that the Athenians often appear to care more about and spend more on plays rather than on defence. The following passage from Plutarch is striking:

ἐνθεν μὲν δὴ προσίτωσαν ὑπ' αὐλοῖς καὶ λύραις ποιηταὶ λέγοντες; καὶ ᾄδοντες [...] καὶ σκευὰς καὶ προσωπεῖα καὶ βωμοὺς καὶ μηχανὰς ἀπὸ σκηνῆς περιάκτους καὶ τρίποδας: ἐπινικίους κομίζοντες. τραγικοὶ δ' αὐτοῖς ὑποκριταὶ [...] συνίτωσαν, ὥσπερ γυναικὸς πολυτελοῦς τῆς τραγῳδίας κομμωταὶ καὶ διφροφόροι [...] σκευῶν δὲ καὶ προσώπων καὶ ξυστίδων ἀλουργῶν καὶ μηχανῶν ἀπὸ σκηνῆς καὶ χοροποιῶν καὶ δορυφόρων δυσπραγμάτευτος λαὸς καὶ χορηγία πολυτελὴς παρασκευαζέσθω. πρὸς ἃ Λάκων ἀνὴρ ἀποβλέψας οὐ κακῶς εἶπεν, ὥς ἀμαρτάνουσιν Ἀθηναῖοι μεγάλα τὴν σπουδὴν εἰς τὴν παιδίαν καταναλίσκοντες, τουτέστι μεγάλων ἀποστόλων δαπάνας καὶ στρατευμάτων ἐφόδια καταχορηγοῦντες εἰς τὸ θέατρον. ἂν γὰρ ἐκλογισθῇ τῶν δραμάτων ἕκαστον ὅσου κατέστη, πλεον ἄνηλωκῶς φανεῖται ὁ δῆμος εἰς Βάκχας καὶ Φοινίσσας καὶ Οἰδίποδας καὶ Ἀντιγόνην καὶ τὰ Μηδείας κακὰ καὶ Ἡλέκτρας, ὧν ὑπὲρ τῆς ἡγεμονίας καὶ τῆς ἐλευθερίας πολεμῶν τοὺς βαρβάρους ἀνάλωσεν.

From this side let the poets come forward chanting and singing to the music of flutes and lyres [...] and carrying props and masks and altars and stage machines and periaktoi and victory tripods. And let the tragic actors enter with them [...] like the beauticians and stool bearers of the rich woman Tragedy [...] Now bring forth the unruly mob of propos and masks and purple robes and stage machines and chorus directors and supernumeraries. Looking at all this, a Spartan once said, quite appositely, that the Athenians were making a big mistake in lavishing so much of their love for play, in effect pouring the expense of large fleets and provisions of armies into the theatre. If the cost of the production of each drama were reckoned, the Athenian people would appear to have spent more on the production of *Bacchae* and *Phoenician Women* and *Oedipuses* and the misfortunes of *Medeas* and *Electras* than they did on maintaining their empire and fighting for their liberty against the Persians. Plutarch, *On the Glory of Athens* 348d-349b, transl. Csapo and Slater, 1994.

So far, this evidence illuminates the practicalities governing choral performance, with regard to scale and civic importance.

In the second part of Wilson's book such ideological issues arising from the practice and symbolism of the *khoregia* are analyzed with relation to the plays themselves. In this section the parallels between the socio-political concerns played out in Attic drama and those implicit in the institution of the *khoregia* become even clearer. Wilson concludes that there is always tension between the *khoregos*, through his wealth and fame, founded on victory and popularity, and the democratic polis. The *khoregos*, whether nouveau riche or of aristocratic origins, is a pre-eminent figure, and as such a problematic one in the Athenian democratic civic context. His wealth, which this institution exists to control and use for the benefit of the state, nonetheless elevates him to a higher standing than his fellow citizens, along with the fact that this institution is designed to honour him if he wins. We know that during the festival he, the benefactor, along with the chorus and the playwright, appeared on stage, the place of public gaze and adoration. The symbolism and power of this moment is not hard to imagine.

The less joyful side of this cultural phenomenon is the variety and number of laws governing the *khoregia*, as well as the frequency of court cases relating to transgression on the part of the *khoregos*. This evidence covers instances of sabotage and bribery among rival *khoregoi*, but also of transgression and other inappropriate behaviour of *khoregoi* with relation to the state. It appears then that all kinds of scandal were caused by this ever-present tension between these glamorous individuals and the democratic polis intrinsically suspicious of anyone who actively seeks distinction and prominence.

These conflicting tendencies in the relationship between the *khoregos* and the city mirror the themes of Greek drama itself, centred on the opposition between the hero and the collective, and are thus relevant to this thesis. In terms of plot, this opposition often emerges when the hero-benefactor of the city through a transgression becomes the destruction of the city. The chorus in this instance represents a collective, moderate voice, switching from adoration for the hero to caution to opposition. It is important to remember that everyone in the audience of citizens had probably participated in a chorus and on some level knew what it felt like; they would often be watching their friends, relatives or neighbours participate in the dramatic chorus, and their communities being represented on stage. Edith Hall's comment on this phenomenon reveals the social impact of the

dramatic contest: ‘A vital principle to grasp is that the ‘audience’ of Greek tragedy was, socially speaking, inseparable from its creative personnel.’<sup>156</sup> This is especially true of the chorus. If the actors playing the main parts gradually became famous stars winning awards each year, the chorus at least during the fifth century continued to draw its members from among the citizens, what we would call ‘amateurs’. But we know they had trained for it all their lives: the importance of *khoreia* for Greek culture, and especially its pedagogical function, meant that whether as boys or young men, whether in a dramatic or religious or poetic chorus, the audience had taken part in such a collective. Thus the poetry culture of Greece is a determining feature of the relationship between the audience, the hero and the chorus.

We draw a similar conclusion from John Herington’s study of tragedy’s poetic roots, which places tragedy within a Greek tradition of song culture, and defines it as one of the genres of performing poetry, which preceded it but also existed alongside it.<sup>157</sup> Parallels are drawn between all the other events of competitive poetry performance and the dramatic contest at the City Dionysia, which highlight tragedy’s socio-political significance and its cultural impact on the Athenian citizenry and empire. Many scholars have drawn attention to the politically-charged ceremonies that took place in the theatre right before the dramatic contest, before an audience of Athenian citizens, allies from foreign cities, and metics, thus setting a political tone for the plays themselves. It is worth mentioning these events briefly here.<sup>158</sup>

Shortly after the audience took their seats a public herald made several announcements including mentioning the benefactors to the city. Then the tribute paid to the city by the allies of the Athenian hegemony was displayed in the theatre in the form of gold. This was followed by a public presentation of a suit of armour to the young men whose parents had died in the war and who had just come of military age. These young men, along with the priest of Dionysus and the priestess of Athena, were given prime seats in the audience. The political character of this prelude to the plays, with its imperialist flavour, formed the ideological context in which the audience watched tragedies’ great debates played out, on issues such as the relationship between conqueror and conquered, the necessity of war, and the corrupting influence of power. Edith Hall in

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<sup>156</sup> Hall (2010) 14.

<sup>157</sup> Herington (1985).

<sup>158</sup> For a detailed description of all the events surrounding the dramatic context see Csapo and Slater (1994) 103-108.



her description of the City Dionysia imagines the impact of this experience by the audience of militaristic and imperialistic rites before the plays began as providing a ‘special source of irony’ for the plots concerned with the same issues.<sup>159</sup> Isocrates’ comment on the imperialist ceremonies of the Athenians in the theatre points to the moral ambiguity of this display:

οὕτω γὰρ ἀκριβῶς εὗρισκον ἐξ ὧν ἄνθρωποι μάλιστα ἄνμισθηθεῖεν, ὥστ’ ἐψηφίσαντο τὸ περιγιγνόμενον ἐκ τῶν φόρων ἀργύριον, διελόντες κατὰ τάλαντον, εἰς τὴν ὀρχήστραν τοῖς Διονυσίοις εἰσφέρειν ἐπειδὰν πληρὲς ᾖ τὸ θέατρον· καὶ τοῦτ’ ἐποίουν, καὶ παρεισῆγον τοὺς παῖδας τῶν ἐν τῷ πολέμῳ τετελευτηκότων, ἀμφοτέροις ἐπιδεικνύοντες τοῖς μὲν συμμάχοις τὰς τιμὰς τῆς οὐσίας αὐτῶν ὑπὸ μισθωτῶν εἰσφερομένης, τοῖς δ’ ἄλλοις Ἑλλήσι τὸ πλῆθος τῶν ὀρφανῶν καὶ τὰς συμφορὰς τὰς διὰ τὴν πλεονεξίαν ταύτην γιγνομένης.

They so precisely found the means by which men can best inspire enmity that they voted to divide the incoming public revenues into talents and bring them into the orchestra during the Dionysia when the theatre was full. This they did and they brought the orphans of the men who died in the war, making a display at once both to the allies of the extent of their wealth that these mercenaries had carried off, and to the other Greeks of the great number of orphans and the suffering caused by this lust for wealth.

Isocrates *On the Peace* 82, 356 B.C. Transl. Csapo and Slater, 1994

Aeschines in *Against Ktesiphon*, delivered in 330 BC, gives an even more vivid picture of this politically and emotionally charged atmosphere, especially in times of war, and the importance of the event for Athens’ image before all of Greece, inviting his audience to imagine themselves not in the courtroom but in the theatre:

γένεσθε δὴ μοι μικρὸν χρόνον τὴν διάνοιαν μὴ ἐν τῷ δικαστηρίῳ, ἀλλ’ ἐν τῷ θεάτρῳ, καὶ νομίσαθ’ ὁρᾶν προϊόντα τὸν κήρυκα καὶ τὴν ἐκ τοῦ ψηφίσματος ἀνάρρησιν μέλλουσαν γίγνεσθαι, καὶ λογίσασθε πότερ’ οἴεσθε τοὺς οἰκείους τῶν τελευτησάντων πλείω δάκρυα ἀφήσειν ἐπὶ ταῖς τραγωδίαις καὶ τοῖς ἡρωικοῖς πάθεσι τοῖς μετὰ ταῦτ’ ἐπεισιοῦσιν, ἢ ἐπὶ τῇ τῆς πόλεως ἀγνωμοσύνῃ. [...] μὴ πρὸς Διὸς καὶ θεῶν, ἱκετεύω ὑμᾶς, ὧ ἄνδρες Ἀθηναῖοι, μὴ τρόπαιον ἵστατε ἀφ’ ὑμῶν αὐτῶν ἐν τῇ τοῦ Διονύσου ὀρχήστρᾳ, μηδ’ αἰρεῖτε παρανοίας ἐναντίον τῶν Ἑλλήνων τὸν δῆμον τὸν Ἀθηναίων.

Suppose for a little while that you are not in the court but in the theatre. Imagine that you see the herald approaching and that the proclamation of

<sup>159</sup> See Hall (2010), p. 25 ff, for a discussion of the political actions preceding the dramatic contest.

the decree is about to take place. Now consider whether you think the relatives of the those who died would shed more tears for the tragedies and heroic sufferings that will come on after this, or for the insensitivity of the city [...] I beg you, Athenians, do not erect in the orchestra of Dionysus a victory monument built from your own spoils, do not convict the people of Athens of madness in front of all Greece.

Aeschines *Against Ktesiphon* 153-54 transl. Csapo and Slater, 1994

We can imagine the emotional and intellectual resonance the great debates of tragedy had for the audience in such a context. As regards our main focus here, the subject of the relationship between audience and chorus, in purely practical and empirical terms, Herington's calculations are impressive. He estimates that for each annual production of the City Dionysia a total of five hundred choristers will have been required for the ten competing dithyrambic choruses of boys; another five hundred for the men's dithyrambic choruses, and an unknown number, but almost certainly not less than thirty-six, for the choruses of the competing tragedians. The dithyrambic choruses were drawn from the ten tribes. We don't know exactly how the tragic choruses were cast, but it is likely that in the early years they were also ordinary citizens.<sup>160</sup>

The goal of the book is a reconstruction of the conditions under which poetry and drama merged, or drama developed from poetry performance. The role, function and origin of the dramatic chorus become crucial to the discussion, as choral lyric is of course one of the main forms of performing poetry in Ancient Greece. The evidence is indeed compelling, and sheds light on artistic, political and social aspects of Greek drama. Herington imagines this 'merge' that leads to the first tragedies being created, sometime in the late 6th century. He connects it with the Peisistratean regime's ambition, which actively encouraged what he calls an 'Athenian poetic revolution' that contributed to making Athens a cultural and economic centre of the Greek world,<sup>161</sup> as well as boosting the political leadership's popularity. These goals, economic, political, and related to foreign policy, are also shared by the newly established democratic state, after the expulsion of the Peisistratids, and of course continue with the development of the Athenian hegemony. The political character of the City Dionysia festival, established around 535 BC, and witnessed by Athenian citizens and foreigners, attests to that.

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<sup>160</sup> Herington (1985) 96. See also Harrison and Liapis (2013) 10, who calculate that 1160 citizens must have participated in all the choruses at the City Dionysia.

<sup>161</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the Peisistratean regime and tragedy see Herington (1985) 79 ff.

Herington shows how these festivals, and especially the City Dionysia, gradually made Athens an important centre of the Greek song culture, at the same time as its political and imperial power was also on the rise. They included many events of choral performance in addition to the dramatic contest, such as the dithyramb contest, all presented in a highly competitive spirit with participating poets from all over the Greek world. In this tradition of agonistic poetry performance, which bore great similarities with large-scale athletic events and was indeed often presented alongside them, the Athenian contribution that Herington calls ‘a momentous innovation’ was of course, the dramatic contest.<sup>162</sup>

Commenting on the importance of the festival context as well as of the spatial relationships created by the ancient theatre for the audience’s experience of the chorus, Liapis, Panayiotakis and Harrison draw attention to the inclusive nature of the open-air ancient theatre, which, in contrast to contemporary theatre spaces, creates the conditions for audience participation: the spectator is active in the act of seeing and being seen. Our misconceptions of the theatrical experience in the ancient theatre also have an impact on our perception of the chorus, the authors note. There is an ‘anachronistic misconception prompted by modern bourgeois notions of the theatre as a segregated or “framed activity”’<sup>163</sup> that extends to the chorus, which we mistakenly view as an element spatially separated from the actors. The authors point out instead that the architecture of the theatre, as well as the civic events framing the performance, created a deep connection between spectators and chorus and, consequently, between the action on stage and the audience:

By occupying positions in the tiered, semi-circular auditorium, which could be perceived as an extension or projection of the circular orchestra, citizen spectators integrated themselves into the citizen chorus, as well as merging with their fellow spectators, who were in full view of each other. And as the orchestra was, at most, only slightly lower by comparison to the mildly elevated stage, the border separating the citizen chorus from the actors was blurred. The audience was encouraged to contemplate itself in relation to the fictive world of the play. Play and audience became mutually permeable, spilling over into each other.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> Herington (1985) 87.

<sup>163</sup> Liapis, Panayiotakis and Harrison (2013) 9-10.

<sup>164</sup> Liapis, Panayiotakis and Harrison (2013) 10.

There were, moreover, several important religious/ritual events taking place outside the theatre before the dramatic contest, still within the festival. Some of these were most likely descendant from ancient cult and included some form of choral activity. The religious side of the festival is often emphasized in arguments supporting the ritual roots of drama and the chorus in particular. The evidence regarding the context of religion, ritual and myth will be the subject of the next section.

## 5. Cult, Myth, Ritual

### i. Context

The religious activities during the City Dionysia, taking place before the dramatic contest, and centring on the introduction of the god Dionysus from the periphery to the heart of the festival, the theatre district, most likely have their roots in very ancient Dionysian ritual. Edith Hall's description of these rites emphasizes the crucial experience of 'psychic geography' for the audience on their way to watch the plays.

The 'psychic geography' internalized by all those who had participated in the *Eisagoge*, the route from the periphery to the centre via shrines of significant local gods, will have provided a mental framework onto which to graft their experiences of the Bronze Age public spaces conjured up in the theatre.<sup>165</sup>

These pre-theatre religious events, which as we shall see provided a frame of reference for rituals, processions and sacrifices re-enacted in the plays, also had a distinctly choral character.<sup>166</sup> The city prepared for the festival with a procession called *Eisagoge*, the 'Introduction', which reproduced the introduction of Dionysus to his theatre in the city sanctuary. In this rite the *xoanon*, the icon of Dionysus in the form of a wooden pole with a mask at one end, adorned with a costume and ivy, was carried from his city sanctuary to an olive grove outside the city called the Academy, which was on the way to Eleutherae high in the hills on the Boeotian border. There it received hymns, probably religious choral performances, and sacrifice, and after two days it was taken in a torchlight procession back to the theatre and his sanctuary from which it had been taken.

An inscription from 121 BC, describing the activities of ephebes, mentions some of the activities preceding the festival proper:

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<sup>165</sup> Hall (2010) 25.

<sup>166</sup> Hall (2010) 22-25.

After sacrificing, they also brought Dionysus from the altar to the theatre by torchlight; and at the Dionysia they led in procession a bull worthy of the god, which they also sacrificed in the precinct during the Procession.

(Inscriptiones Graecae II2 1006.12-13)<sup>167</sup>

Once Dionysus was in place, the festival opened officially on the next day with the *pompe*, the procession, which was the central rite of the Great Dionysia. This day marked the beginning of a time of celebration for the city and for the duration of the festival civic functions paused: there was no Assembly and no legal proceedings, and it is likely that prisoners were temporarily released.

The procession itself probably started at the city walls, stopping at each of several shrines on the way to the temple of Dionysus, where choruses sang and danced for different gods. Thus on this the first day of the festival the audience will have experienced several choral performances already even before the plays themselves had started, and even before getting to the theatre. Xenophon describes this practice of honouring the shrines of the gods all along the way to the theatre:

τὰς μὲν οὖν πομπὰς οἶομαι ἂν καὶ τοῖς θεοῖς κεχαρισμενωτάτας καὶ τοῖς θεαταῖς εἶναι εἰ, ὅσων ἱερὰ καὶ ἀγάλματα ἐν τῇ ἀγορᾷ ἐστί, ταῦτα ἀρξάμενοι ἀπὸ τῶν Ἑρμῶν κύκλῳ περὶ τὴν ἀγορὰν καὶ τὰ ἱερὰ περιελαύνοιεν τιμῶντες τοὺς θεοὺς. καὶ ἐν τοῖς Διονυσίοις δὲ οἱ χοροὶ προσεπιχαρίζονται ἄλλοις τε θεοῖς καὶ τοῖς δώδεκα χορεύοντες.

I think the processions would be most pleasing to the gods and spectators alike if, starting from the Herms (in the Athenian marketplace), one rode around to all the shrines and cult statues in a circle honouring the gods. Indeed, the choruses at the Dionysia pay their respects to the other gods and the twelve with their dancing.

Xenophon *Hipparchikos* 3.2. (388-355 BC) transl. Csapo and Slater, 1994.

The participants in the procession represented different social groups and their placement and role in the rite symbolically reflected the relationships between them and to the state. A prominent place was given to a virgin daughter of an aristocratic family carrying the golden basket for the best meat from the sacrifices. Khoregoi in very luxurious costume

<sup>167</sup> Quoted in Csapo and Slater (1994) 111.

also participated in the procession, as did *ephebes* (young men in military training) who accompanied the great sacrificial bull. Also taking part the procession were citizens carrying loaves of bread on spits (ὀβελίαι) and wine skins, followed by metics carrying mixed wine and water, which was carried in the procession by their daughters. Bringing up the rear were more groups of men carrying the ritual phalluses of Dionysus and singing hymns. During the procession many sacrifices were taking place, and the goal was to feed the large crowd participating or observing. Therefore, as Hall observes, the City Dionysia bore resemblance to more ancient rural festivals celebrating Dionysus, with a raucous atmosphere including drinking, phalluses and singing.

Dicaeopolis, the protagonist in Aristophanes' *Acharnians*, in lines 237-265, after signing a private peace treaty with Sparta, celebrates the rural Dionysia privately with his family, but the procession he describes, comically, in the play, has elements of the procession in the city Dionysia.<sup>168</sup> The scene gives a sense of this carnivalesque spirit described above, and the ancient rural roots of the procession:

**Δικαιόπολις**

εὐφημεῖτε, εὐφημεῖτε.

προῖτω σ' τὸ πρόσθεν ὀλίγον ἢ κανηφόρος:

ὁ Ξανθίας τὸν φαλλὸν ὀρθὸν στησάτω.

κατάθου τὸ κανοῦν ὦ θύγατερ, ἵν' ἀπαρξώμεθα.

**Θυγάτηρ**

ὦ μῆτερ ἀνάδος δεῦρο τὴν ἐτνήρυσιν,

ἵν' ἔτνος καταχέω τοῦλατῆρος τουτουί.

**Δικαιόπολις**

καὶ μὴν καλὸν γ' ἔστ': ὦ Διόνυσε δέσποτα  
κεχαρισμένως σοι τήνδε τὴν πομπὴν ἐμὲ  
πέμψαντα καὶ θύσαντα μετὰ τῶν οἰκετῶν  
ἀγαγεῖν τυχηρῶς τὰ κατ' ἀγροῦς Διονύσια,  
στρατιᾶς ἀπαλλαχθέντα: τὰς σπονδὰς δέ μοι  
καλῶς ξυνενεγκεῖν τὰς τριακοντούτιδας.  
ἄγ' ὦ θύγατερ ὅπως τὸ κανοῦν καλῇ καλῶς  
οἴσεις βλέπουσα θυμβροφάγον. ὥς μακάριος  
ὅστις σ' ὀπύσει κάκποιήσεται γαλᾶς  
σοῦ μηδὲν ἥττους βδεῖν, ἐπειδὰν ὀρθὸς ᾗ.  
πρόβαινε, κὰν τῷχλω φυλάττεσθαι σφόδρα  
μή τις λαθὼν σου περιτράγη τὰ χρυσία.  
ὦ Ξανθία, σφῶν δ' ἐστὶν ὀρθὸς ἐκτέος  
ὁ φαλλὸς ἐξόπισθε τῆς κανηφόρου:  
ἐγὼ δ' ἀκολουθῶν ἄσομαι τὸ φαλλικόν:

<sup>168</sup> See Csapo and Slater (1994) 114.

σὺ δ' ὦ γύναι θεῶ μ' ἀπὸ τοῦ τέγους πρόβα.

**Dikaiopolis:**

Speak fair! Speak fair! Will the basket-bearer walk forward a little? Xanthias, hold that phallus up straight. Put down the basked, my girl, so we can make the opening sacrifice.

**Daughter:**

Mother, hand me up the ladle here, so I can pour soup over this beaten-cake.

**Dikaiopolis:**

There, that's fine. O Lord Dionysus, may this procession which I hold and this sacrifice be pleasing to thee, and may I and my household celebrate with all good fortune the Country Dionysia, now that I am released from soldiering; and may the thirty years' peace prove a blessing to me. Come now, my pretty girl, make sure you carry the basket prettily, with a savory-eating look. What a happy man he'll be that mates with you and begets a set of ferrets as good as you at farting in the grey dawn! Set forward; and take great care in the crowd that no one snaffles your gold ornaments on the sly. And, Xanthias, you two must hold the phallus upright behind the basket bearer; and I'll follow and sing the phallic hymn. And you, missus, watch me from the roof.

Aristophanes' *Acharnians*, 237-265, transl. Alan H. Sommerstein 1980.

Plutarch in *On the Love of Wealth* looks back with nostalgia to the old traditional way of celebrating the Dionysia, his description strongly resembling this Aristophanic scene, and complains about the way the procession was done in his own time, with extravagance and an excessive display of wealth:

ἀλλὰ νῦν ταῦτα παρεώραται καὶ ἠφάνισται χρυσομάτων  
περιφερομένων καὶ ἱματίων πολυτελῶν καὶ ζευγῶν  
ἐλαυνομένων καὶ προσωπείων.

But nowadays this is disregarded and gone, what with vessels of gold carried past, rich apparel, carriages riding by, and masks.  
Plutarch *On the Love of Wealth* 527d, transl. Csapo and Slater 1994.

We see therefore a procession of ancient Dionysiac roots becoming also an opportunity for display of wealth, hierarchy and influence.

After the procession, but probably before the plays, a choral competition of choruses of fifty took place, which must have been an impressive large-scale event. Once

they arrived at the theatre various events of political nature took place in preparation for the dramatic festival itself, mentioned in the previous section. A religious tone was given by the purification of the theatre by the sacrifice of piglets and wine libations by the ten *strategoï*, the most senior officials of the state. Edith Hall notes here that the various rituals in a tragedy were seen by an audience who have just participated in large-scale public sacrifice and libation. These rites set a religious tone, and a frame of reference in which to see rituals in the plays, which may include processions, sacrifices, prayers, libations and honouring the gods through choral dancing.<sup>169</sup>

This is especially important in a study of the chorus, since the chorus' function in the drama is often to perform or witness ritual, thus giving it validity and weight in the eyes of the audience. We can infer this not only from the content of the choral odes in the plays themselves, but because we know that choral performance throughout Greece was one of the most widespread ways to honour the gods at their sanctuaries or at events dedicated to them, such as games or choral contests. This strong association throughout Greece of non-dramatic choral performance with the worship of the gods is one of the main subjects in John Herington's detailed discussion of ancient Greek poetry.<sup>170</sup> On this subject, and its possible meaning for dramatic choral performance, Albert Henrichs writes: '*Khoreia* did not take place in a religious vacuum; it meant 'to serve the gods through the medium of the dance'.<sup>171</sup>

We see that the cultic and ritual context of the dramatic chorus is interwoven with the festival structure, which is in turn an important part of the Athenian, and Greek, religious calendar. At the same time, in addition to the City Dionysia, there was a plethora of religious practices and festivals dedicated to the gods, some of which were very ancient, fundamental to social cohesion, and in which choral performance was a crucial part. In the following section I will examine the ritual and religious content of the plays, which corresponds to real-life religious practice in ancient Greece. This content, essentially obscure to us as it refers to a lost religion, is usually centred on or at least enhanced by the presence of the chorus, creating one of the biggest challenges for the contemporary director.

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<sup>169</sup> Hall (2010) 25.

<sup>170</sup> Herington (1985).

<sup>171</sup> Henrichs (1994).



## ii. Content

As we have seen, even scholars who are drawn to the theory of ritual origins admit that it is impossible to prove it.<sup>172</sup> It is also hard to draw any definite conclusions on the nature and intensity of the religious atmosphere during the Dionysia, especially since the Greek way of expressing religious sentiment and the relationship with the divine greatly differs from our own. Perhaps then what is more useful, especially from the point of view of a contemporary practitioner, is to keep in mind how tragedy alludes to certain Greek religious rites, rather than whether it derives from them.

In the earlier section on origins we saw how scholars have explored the multiple levels of connection between sacrifice, cult and tragedy.<sup>173</sup> In this section I will look at some of the ways in which the ritual role of the chorus is integrated with their dramatic role, as well how ritual performed by the chorus is used, and manipulated, by the authors in a theatrical setting. I hope that this will help illuminate the range of sources for inspiration derived from myth and cult available to the tragedians *and* to modern directors.

Helene Foley<sup>174</sup> and Pat Easterling<sup>175</sup> have both shown how the perversion or manipulation of ritual can heighten dramatic effect. Pat Easterling emphasizes the sheer volume and variety of ritual words, actions or scenes in the extant plays, seen on stage or narrated, including sacrifice, birth-rites, oath-taking, necromancy, purification, libation, supplication, curse etc. As Easterling points out the power and resonance, both visually and verbally, of these rites is enhanced by the presence of the chorus, since in real life a non-dramatic chorus would have been present at most of these instances, which are all focal points of community life.

The range of possibilities is enormously widened by the fact that the chorus is always there, and it is never simply a group of sympathetic bystanders or witnesses [...] It is always also a chorus ready to perform lyrics patterned on ritual song and dance and accompanied by appropriate music: a paeon [...] a funeral lament, a maenadic cult song and son on [...] There is hardly any choral lyric that is entirely without such associations.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> Burkert (1983), Seaford (1994) 275.

<sup>173</sup> An aspect of this connection between tragedy and ritual, about which I won't go into detail in this thesis, is ritual transvestism, discussed by Zeitlin (1985) and (1995).

<sup>174</sup> Foley (1985).

<sup>175</sup> Easterling (1988).

<sup>176</sup> Easterling (1988) 89.

I will make an attempt here to list instances when the choruses have a ritual function that is integral to the plot and characterisation - at least what I feel are the most important instances from extant tragedy, since in virtually all choruses religious language and the language of prayer is a necessary ingredient, but the ritual role receives varying emphasis in the plays: in Aeschylus we have some very striking examples of ritual acts, at times akin to magic, such as for example necromancy and curse. The main characters' investment in or reaction against these acts is proof that they are extremely important to the plot: in the *Persians*, a chorus of aging courtiers assist the Queen to perform necromancy, and succeed in raising ghost of Dareios, with lyrics containing invocations to the dead king and to the gods of the underworld (623-680). In the *Choephoroi* the chorus of Eastern slave women lament at length and attempt necromancy again at the tomb of Agamemnon, together with Electra and Orestes. The ghost here never appears (315-509), but this doesn't mean that the audience knew it wouldn't. In the *Eumenides* the chorus of Erinyes sing and dance the famous 'Binding song', a violent ritual dance, containing magical incantations aimed to put a paralyzing curse on Orestes, and ultimately to kill him (321-396).<sup>177</sup> At the end of the play they exit in a religious procession, transformed to benevolent goddesses and praying. In *Seven against Thebes* the women of Thebes enter in line 78 in frantic supplication to the statues of the gods, wailing in terror for impending doom, but this angers Eteocles who orders them to stop the supplication (181) and instead raise a triumphant cry for a celebratory sacrifice. In the *Suppliants* the chorus of Danaid maidens enter in ritual supplication, holding branches wrapped with wool (1 ff.) This ritual act strengthens their claim for asylum. In Sophocles' plots religion and cult are often pivotal, and connected with aetiological myths and places of worship. In *Ajax* the funeral procession at the end is a religious ritual performed by the chorus of soldiers, at the bidding of Teucer, crucial in establishing that Ajax will receive a proper burial and will be honoured in posterity—one of the main contested issues in the plot (1405 ff.) In *Antigone* the chorus of old men councillors to the king offer an urgent prayer to Bacchus, using ritual language of purification and asking him to appear in Thebes and deliver the city from the plague (1115-1154). In *Trachiniae* the chorus of local women perform a joyous Paeon at the news of Heracles' arrival, urging the whole household to join in the *ololygmos* (205-223). In *Oedipus Tyrannus* the chorus call attention to their religious role in worshipping the gods through ritual dance and song, the

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<sup>177</sup> See Faraone (1985) and below, pp.122-123.

famous τί δεῖ με χορεύειν; (896), at a moment when the main characters question religious authority: Jocasta in line 857 has just dismissed the authority of divination. In *Oedipus at Colonus* the ritual authority and piety of the chorus of old men is made apparent by the detailed advice they give to Oedipus in lines 461-490 of how exactly he should pray and give offerings to the Eumenides in order to gain atonement. So, when in lines 1556-1619 they pray solemnly to the gods of death for an easy passing for Oedipus, we may be more inclined to believe that their prayer will work. Their religious authority also serves to enhance the strand of the plot that is connected with the consecration of Colonus and the establishment of cult. Now in Euripides, even though choral lyric is generally reduced, we also have a great variety of ritual identities and acts of the chorus, but the religious and emotional register is often more complicated than in the other two tragedians. In *Alcestis* the male chorus perform together with Admetos the funeral procession for Alcestis, which also leads them off stage for some time in 746.<sup>178</sup> In *Electra* the chorus are Argive maidens on their way to Hera's temple for sacrifice (167), decked out for ritual practice with appropriate clothing and adornments (190-194), in high contrast to the heroine. Later, in this play which is filled with the language of ritual, they sing and dance a vigorous victory ode (860-879) at the news of Aegisthus' murder. The chorus of the *Bacchae* are of course followers of the new religion of Dionysus, who are initiated in his rites and arrive at Thebes with him. In *Heracles*, perhaps it is possible that the playwright is referring to instances of necromancy by the chorus in other tragedies, in lines 252-256 (ὦ γῆς λοχεύμαθ', οὗς Ἄρης σπείρει ποτὲ / λάβρον δράκοντος ἐξερημώσας γένυν, / οὐ σκῆπτρα, χειρὸς δεξιᾶς ἐρείσματα, / ἀρεῖτε καὶ τοῦδ' ἄνδρὸς ἀνόσιον κάρα καθαιματώσεθ'). This is not actual necromancy, more of an angry wish, but perhaps Euripides is creating here an echo of a typical ritual action of the chorus in tragedy. In *Hippolytus* the protagonist and the chorus of male servants (the first of two choruses in the play, but not the main one) enter praying to Artemis (58 ff.) and laying offerings at her statue, framing a most eloquent characterization for Hippolytus himself as soon as we lay eyes on him. In *Ion*, there is a reversal of the usual religious dynamic between chorus and protagonist, and that in itself is interesting, in the context of this discussion: the chorus who enter the scene by the temple of Apollo in Delphi are more like tourists than pilgrims, as is revealed by the tone of their conversation with Ion. The character of this chorus is further enhanced by the contrast with the hero's ritual actions at the beginning

<sup>178</sup> On choruses exiting the orchestra see above pp.67-69.

of the play. The chorus' lack of solemnity, or 'religious decorum' in the presence of the oracle sets a special kind of register for this unusual play. In *Iphigeneia in Tauris* the chorus' ritual and religious role is revealed immediately upon their entrance, in 123 (ἐὺφραμεῖτ', 'keep holy silence'). They are Greek women who attend Iphigenia in her role as priestess in the temple of Artemis. This will prove pivotal to the plot. Similarly, the chorus of Phoenician maidens in *Phoenician Women* announce their ritual role at the temple of Apollo, where they serve the god, upon their entrance (l. 203). In the *Suppliants*, the initiating incident of the play is of course the chorus' supplication at the temple of Demeter in Eleusis. The chorus here are Argive mothers of the dead who fought in the war against Thebes, and are already on stage when the play begins, keeping Aithra bound to the temple through the holy bonds of supplication.

This cursory overview reveals the variety of ritual action, characterization and language. It also reveals that, as tragedy develops, the potential ritual role of the chorus is available to the playwright to use in a less straightforward way, in a self-referential mood, building on audience experience and expectation.

Pat Easterling has shown how the use, manipulation or perversion of ritual is not just virtuosic poetic display or stage metaphor, but a dramaturgical point that has to be taken into account in our interpretation of the story.<sup>179</sup> To use two of her examples pertaining to the chorus: as I mentioned above, the original audience would experience the funeral procession of the chorus at the end of *Ajax* not just as an emotional final tableau, but as a resolution of the play's pressing question of what will happen to his remains, and, consequently, his memory. This ritual solution (to the ancient audience a clear promise of hero cult for Ajax) is given to a question posed repeatedly in the play and explored in many scenes through ritual imagery and language.<sup>180</sup> But, it is important to stress here Easterling's point that these rituals in the play are not exactly like rituals in real life. Ritual language, imagery and behaviour still holds its power over the audience even if, and perhaps especially if, it is manipulated. Similarly, the end of the *Eumenides* is a ritual procession by the chorus, reminiscent of the Panathenaic procession, and consisting of prayers for prosperity. But again, in real life the Eumenides would not be the ones praying, since they are goddesses themselves.<sup>181</sup> The emotional impact on the

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<sup>179</sup> Easterling (1988).

<sup>180</sup> Easterling (1988) 92.

<sup>181</sup> Another important example that Easterling discusses here, not related to the chorus, is Euripides' emphasis on ritual language in *Electra*. In his version of the myth, the murders of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra may be interpreted as distinctly more repellent and outrageous than in Sophocles or

Athenian audience of staging an existing ritual ‘reversed’, can only be imagined by us. But it is good to try to *imagine* every aspect of the original context, when interpreting the plays and the role of the chorus in the plot. In some plays, rituals are pointedly distorted or corrupted to point up the effect of the tragic plot and atmosphere.<sup>182</sup>

Among group rituals performed by the dramatic chorus with prototypes in Greek religion, society and cult, ritual lament has attracted considerable attention. Perhaps one of the reasons for this is the fact that lament, as a ritual performed by a group of members of the community, was alive in parts of Greece until at least the middle of the 20th century. The connection between the oral poetry and the drama of antiquity to 20<sup>th</sup>-century traditions in Greece is of course something that has fascinated many scholars. Margaret Alexiou’s groundbreaking work on female lament in Greek tradition, first published in 1974, and again, revised, in 2002,<sup>183</sup> has had a lasting influence on this topic, especially because it is based on evidence gathered from living traditions of ritual lament in rural Greece. Alexiou’s work is also a point of reference regarding the connection between ritual and lamentation: ‘the traditional lament for the dead fulfils a dual function: objectively, it is designed to honour and appease the dead, while subjectively, it gives expression to a wide range of conflicting emotions.’<sup>184</sup> In chapter 4 she finds similarities between lamentations in hero cults throughout the Mediterranean and the Middle East, which seem to share their origins in harvest rites. She stresses the importance of lament in ritual and mystic cult, and also draws parallels between the Virgin Mary’s lament at the death of Christ, the *Epitaphios threnos*, with ancient Greek cult and hymns.

Gail Holst-Warhaft<sup>185</sup> also focuses on women’s lament in ancient and modern Greece. The emphasis here is on the threats ritual lament poses to ‘civilized’, male-dominated society, and the author presents a history of suppression, marginalization and male appropriation of these dangerous female death rites. According to Holst-Warhaft, the reasons why women’s lament poses a threat to the organized state are first because through lament a family or personal loss seems more important than dying for the state, secondly, because lament, through passionate incitement, perpetuates a violent cycle of revenge and thirdly because it gives authority to women in a patriarchal society.<sup>186</sup>

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Aeschylus, because they are almost obsessively connected to ritual acts and ritual language, metaphorically and literally (Easterling 1988, 101 ff.)

<sup>182</sup> See for example Zeitlin (1965).

<sup>183</sup> Alexiou, Margaret, Yatromanolakis and Roilos (2002).

<sup>184</sup> Alexiou (2002) 55.

<sup>185</sup> Holst-Warhaft (1992).

<sup>186</sup> Holst-Warhaft (1992) 3.

Her evidence includes Athenian legislation aiming to contain and limit public lament, but also the dramatization of this tension in tragedy.<sup>187</sup> She recognizes the potential for political manipulation of our responses to mass death, which we can observe in today's world but perhaps initiated in democratic Athens, and explored in tragedy.<sup>188</sup> She finds similarities between the 5<sup>th</sup>-century Athenian democracy and organized Christian religion in the way they suppressed, normalized and appropriated previously female-dominated rites, such as funeral lament.

Her analysis of specific instances in the plays to illustrate the point that tragedy 'expresses the concern at the power unleashed by women's grieving',<sup>189</sup> contributes greatly to a discussion of the staging of the chorus. She focuses especially on the dramaturgical importance of certain death-related rituals in Aeschylus' plays; these reveal, she argues, that tragedy was dramatizing unresolved tensions created by the transition into the new, democratic system. For example, in her analysis of lament in the *Oresteia*, which she calls 'Aeschylus' most complex treatment of mourning and its potential for engendering violence', she concludes that throughout the trilogy the frightening and subversive power of female mourning is dramaturgically crucial. Her view of the chorus in *Choephoroi* is especially intriguing and opens up many possibilities in the current discussion:

[W]hat we are about to witness is, I believe, something that Aeschylus' Athenian audience were thoroughly familiar with: a lament at the graveside led by 'professional' women mourners who 'stage' emotional response and by doing so inspire not only pity and fear but violent action.<sup>190</sup>

Helene Foley also offers a thorough discussion of the politics of lamentation,<sup>191</sup> stressing the connections between lamentation, political upheaval and vendetta justice. She agrees with Alexiou's conclusions in that respect. She stresses the dramaturgical importance of such long passages of lamentation, which have plot-related effects and are not just inserted for their emotional resonance. She also notes that a non-western or rural

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<sup>187</sup> Holst-Warhaft (1992) 3.

<sup>188</sup> Holst-Warhaft (1992) 126. On the power of public mourning and grief to stir up acts of violence see also Goldhill (2012).

<sup>189</sup> Holst-Warhaft (1992) 126.

<sup>190</sup> Holst-Warhaft (1992) 142.

<sup>191</sup> Foley (2002). See especially Part 1, 'The Politics of Tragic Lamentation', pp. 19 ff, for a discussion of lamentation, its dramaturgical and political significance.

Mediterranean audience will recognize these layers of meaning in tragic lamentation, and react to them more appropriately than a Western audience, through the social and cultural context available to them.<sup>192</sup>

Whether the death rites have another power, in addition to the political one, that is, a magical power, is a contested point among scholars. If such an aspect existed for the original audience, it is even harder to grasp today. Holst-Warhaft argues that lament in the *Oresteia* is a vehicle for communicating with the dead and is accompanied by ritual gesture and action, and calls the *kommós* of the *Choephoroi*, ‘magical’ on several occasions.<sup>193</sup> Similarly, she notes that the much-discussed binding song in the *Eumenides* (321-396) has been referred to by scholars as a form of magic.<sup>194</sup> There are indeed extremely strong ritual elements here: it is a horrifying song and dance (307 ἄγε δὴ καὶ χορὸν ἄψωμεν), whose purpose is to put a paralyzing curse on Orestes. It is a frantic, discordant song, as the Erinyes themselves describe it:

ἐπὶ δὲ τῷ τεθυμένῳ  
τόδε μέλος, παρακοπά,  
παραφορὰ φρενοδαλῆς,  
ὕμνος ἐξ Ἑρινύων,  
δέσμιος φρενῶν, ἀφόρ-  
μικτος, αὐτὸνὰ βροτοῖς.  
Aesch. *Eum.* 328-333

This is our song over the sacrificial victim—  
frenzied, maddened, destroying the mind,  
the Furies' hymn,  
a spell to bind the soul,  
not tuned to the lyre,  
withering the life of mortals.  
(transl. Herbert Weir Smyth 1926)

The text implies that the choreography is extremely vigorous and builds to a frenzied climax, perhaps reminiscent of cults that reach trance through movement: μάλα γὰρ οὖν ἀλομένα/ἀνέκαθεν βαρυπεςσῇ/ καταφέρω ποδὸς ἀκμάν (372-374).

This must have been an impressive spectacle, whether or not we share the conclusion of Holst-Warhaft that witchcraft is associated with female mourners singing

<sup>192</sup> Foley (2002) 21.

<sup>193</sup> Holst-Warhaft (1992) 146, 147 and *passim*.

<sup>194</sup> There is scholarly disagreement on the effectiveness of the magic here. See: Faraone (1985), Easterling (2008), De Romilly (1958).

the lament.<sup>195</sup> Whether we can find conclusive historical evidence for such an interpretation, it is worth considering that the re-enactment of magical rites is theatrically exciting, regardless of the author's or audience's direct experience of them—think of the witches in *Macbeth*. It is made exciting and frightening as opposed to overwhelmingly terrifying by theatrical convention, dramatic illusion: the contract between audience and actors that what we see is not actually true. Thus theatre is a place where we can explore the metaphysical, something 'out of this world', something imaginary, such as monstrous chthonic deities performing witchcraft, or the appearance of ghosts of dead kings. This is an aspect that we perhaps need to keep reminding ourselves in this discussion, when the balance tips too often towards an anthropological analysis.

Yet another way to look at ritual that opens up new horizons for theatrical interpretation is put forth by Albert Henrichs in his influential work on choral self-referentiality in tragedy,<sup>196</sup> which revisits the theory of the ritual interpretation of Greek drama under a new light. In this paper, Henrichs examines the boundaries of theatricality in Greek drama, illuminating both author experimentation and audience response. He highlights the importance of ritual, both in the context of the festival and in the character of the chorus. The importance of city cult and ritual, with its choral dances, remain central to this argument, and in his opinion these phenomena are crucial in understanding the function of a dramatic chorus; not as an element from a distant ritual past that gave birth to tragedy, but as a living, crucial element of cultural and religious life in 5<sup>th</sup>-century Athens: 'Choral dancing in ancient Greek culture always constitutes a form of ritual performance, whether the dance is performed in the context of the dramatic festival or in the other cultic and festive settings'.<sup>197</sup> Therefore, the setting and the cultic ambience of the city Dionysia reinforce the ritual function of choral dances.

As the over-arching aim of this chapter is to use the evidence from the classical Athenian context in order to illuminate our own understanding and audience experience, I hesitate to draw any conclusions as to the purely religious side, since I feel that with respect to the 'cultic ambience' we are on shaky ground. It can be misleading to try to imagine the cultic ambience in the Great Dionysia as something resembling a mass religious event today, with its implications of solemnity and mysticism. Besides, the more

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<sup>195</sup> Holst-Warhaft (1992) 160-61.

<sup>196</sup> Henrichs (1994).

<sup>197</sup> Henrichs (1994) 5.



information we gather about the original context of the performance, the more massive international sports events come to mind, rather than mass pilgrimage.

Nonetheless it is true that the song-and-dance of the chorus had a religious point of reference in the culture, as Henrichs points out. Gods such as Dionysus, Apollo and Artemis were worshipped through choral song and dance and are frequently mentioned in the choral odes. Henrichs' paper centres around some extremely useful reflections on the chorus, as regards its theatrical and dramatic integration in the whole. The focus are the few instances, in the work of all three tragedians, when the chorus refer to their own dancing in their song. The author observes that when this happens, invariably they comment on the role of their ritual dance song within the drama. They are not 'breaking the dramatic illusion', but they are placing this ritual act of dancing and singing in a group within the plot and the ritual atmosphere of the play.

I find this inspirational for a director today, because it is an instance of the playwright aiming to achieve integration of choral lyric—which we spend so much time defining and explaining as a concept separate and independent from drama, an older, influential and familiar feature of Greek art, religion, education and civic life—with the actual plot and characterization of everyone stage, including the chorus members. The playwright of the 5th century BCE had perhaps less reason to want to achieve this integration, his audience being, as we have seen, thoroughly familiar with the chorus. He still attempts to do it though, which shows again the degree of conceptualization and experimentation that could go into these plays. Perhaps, as Henrichs says, this very self-referentiality reveals that the ritual roots and function of the chorus were being called into question by the three tragedians writing during the 'rational' 5<sup>th</sup> century. Today we have even more reason to constantly try to define the role of the chorus in a contemporary staging.

Henrichs supports the view that ritual activities never actually bring about results in the action of the drama: 'Invariably in tragedy, ritual remedies employed to gain undue advantage, to enhance one's social status, or to redress one ill by the commission of another ultimately prove ineffective and lead to a transformation of those who turn to them. This applies not only to tragic characters who perform rituals but also to choruses who get carried away and place excessive confidence in their dancing.'<sup>198</sup> Why don't we have magical reversals in the plot through ritual, not even in the most mythical and

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<sup>198</sup> Henrichs (1994) 10.

magical plays by Aeschylus? The analysis on the power of lamentation above would seem to be at odds with Henrich's conclusion. In any case, even without an actual impact on the series of events, such instances heighten the drama in their own way. For example Henrich's analysis of 'τί δέῃ με χορεύειν;', this famous and puzzling utterance of the chorus in *Oedipus Tyrannus*, shows it to be a combination of the dramatic role in the context of the Theban plot and the ritual role in the context of the Athenian festival. For Henrichs, choral self-referentiality means that the chorus' two roles, as performer in the civic and cultic context of Athens, and as a dramatic character in the play, are simultaneous, inseparable and in some instances become one and the same. He points out that this particular chorus in *O.T.* also sings that they will go to Kithairon and dance 'tomorrow', if everything turns out fine, again, fusing their choral and dramatic role.

By this broadening of their dramatic identity, through breaking the boundaries between choral performance and dramatic character, with their reflections that reach to the mythic past, Athenian present and a future that lies outside the particular play, the chorus members enhance the effect of the play on the audience: these thoughts are loaded with dramatic irony. The fact is that the chorus cannot escape their role as dancers; they cannot stop the unfolding of the events, nor can they foresee correctly, as dramatic characters, what will happen in the future. But at this crucial moment in the play, this choral ode enhances the reversal of fortune that is about to happen.

Ismene Lada-Richard's contribution to the ritual reading of Greek drama should be mentioned here, even though her influential book *Initiating Dionysus* is centered on the comic Dionysus in Aristophanes' *Frogs*, arguing that the real-life religious and mythical context shaped the original audience's theatrical experience.<sup>199</sup> The book's central argument, which offers a new dimension to the characterization of the protagonist, often seen as a buffoon, is highly relevant here, since Lada-Richards argues that the interpretation of the character of Dionysus in this play (or any play) cannot be separated from the non-theatrical connotations and 'baggage', as she calls it, surrounding Dionysus in real life. That means cult, myth and the ritual activity of the polis. Therefore, this context must be taken into account when we try to reconstruct the original meaning of any play in which divine or mythical figures and ritual acts are part of the plot. More specifically, this reading of the play, centred on the main character's 'journey', highlights the parallels between the structure of the *Frogs* and the structure of initiation rites in

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<sup>199</sup> Lada-Richards (1999).

ancient Greece, such as the Mysteries at Eleusis, Orphic and Dionysiac cult, rites of passage into adulthood etc.

Part of the reason why I mention this reading of the *Frogs* here, is that it influenced my own experience as a director, both times I directed this play.<sup>200</sup> Reflecting on the potential for certain ‘serious’ aspects in the character of Dionysus, which would give him more depth, a stronger arc and thus, a deeper meaning to the entire play, I found the close parallel with initiation into a mystical religion, in conjunction with an acute awareness of the play’s historical context, extremely helpful in a contemporary staging. Even though today we are not addressing an audience of initiates, the interpretation of the character of Dionysus as an initiand, who must suffer through several trials and experience ritual ‘death’ in order to gain enlightenment and knowledge, can serve to reveal and highlight the play’s more serious, even tragic, dimension, already present in its historical context, and peeking out from time to time, such as during the parabasis.

In both productions the ritual reading, especially the idea of the katabasis as a painful process that ultimately leads to profound change, was influential in the staging and also served to lead to an exploration of contemporary, ‘theatrical’ ritual, resulting in an atmosphere that highlighted both the metadramatic aspect of the play but also the potentially moving finale. Furthermore, the ritual reading of the play applied to both choruses, that of the *Frogs* and that of the *Mystics*, helps us make sense of their dramatic agency, the reason behind their presence, as well as the close connection between the religious and meta-theatrical themes that run throughout the play.

I hope I have given a sense of the great variety of ways in which ritual and cult have been woven into the composition of the plays. In this evolving, experimental genre, there is no general statement about the degree of religiosity or mysticism that can be made with certainty. Simply to say tragedy came from cult and should be seen in a religious context is limiting and not useful for the contemporary practitioner. But cult and ritual are part of the intricate mosaic that forms the ancient context of the plays.

I think that many contemporary directors instinctively sense that any audience at any time, even today, could recognize most ritual action performed before them on stage,

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<sup>200</sup> The first production, in a translation by Kostis Kolotas, set design and choreography by Irina Constantin Poulos, costumes by Mimi Maxmen and music by George Kolias, was produced at the Greek Cultural Centre in New York in 2007. The second production, in a new translation by Vaio Liapis, set design by Dimitris Alithinos, costume design by Elena Katsouri, music by Lefteris Moutzizis and choreography by Chloe Melidou, was first presented at the 16th International Festival of Ancient Greek Drama in Cyprus, in 2012.

even if it came from another, unknown culture altogether or even if it was invented for that particular performance. There are certain universal signs for it, theatricality (reenactment, fixed set of gestures, fixed set of actions known and shared by a group, assumption of a different identity, fluidity of time and place, reversal, passage to a different state through a form of suffering) being perhaps one of the most important. However, the emotional impact of such a performance as well as its exact dramaturgical significance may depend, as scholars have shown, on cultural context and previous experience—the specifics of cult and religion. A contemporary director then can choose from various available options when dealing with this issue, ranging from manipulating known traditions of the contemporary audience to creating new worlds. In our effort to understand and stage the chorus today, these options are worth exploring.

## 6. The Dance Culture of Ancient Greece

I have indirectly touched on the issue of dance in the previous discussions on ritual and civic context, where it emerged that choral dancing was part of wider culture of dance, connected to the worship of the gods and to the city and countryside festivals. Therefore, having separate discussions on the place of dance in Greek drama often seems artificial. Nonetheless this categorization in the discussion is aimed to help our contemporary understanding of the cultural and aesthetic mosaic surrounding the chorus.

The Greek chorus' formal structure of dance-and-song is perhaps the most awkward for the contemporary practitioner. The seamless integration of poetry, dance and song into one in ancient Greece is hard to grasp without a direct cultural equivalent. Today music, poetry, and choreography are created separately, usually by separate artists, like in opera, musical and ballet. In ancient Greece the same person often wrote music and words, was the choreographer and sometimes even a performer. Although ancient Greek tragedy is the foundation for the development of Western theatre, in this particular formal aspect it has more similarities with Eastern performative arts.

Since there was no dance notation, and our main evidence comes from vase painting, some indirect descriptions from ancient sources, and from the choruses themselves when they refer to their movement (e.g. the binding song of the *Eumenides* above, pp.122-123, or the *Persians* in the necromancy) it is virtually impossible to

recreate the choreography of Greek tragedy. Even so there are a few conclusions we can draw from the ancient sources, especially with regard to the connection between poetry, music and movement.

In Plato's *Laws*, our main source for the dance, the term *khoreia* (χορεία) is defined as encompassing both singing and dancing: Χορεία γε μὴν ὄρχησις τε καὶ ᾠδὴ τὸ σύνολόν ἐστιν.<sup>201</sup> We have already seen in the previous sections the emphasis that Plato lays on the importance of choral training in education and the place of choral dancing in religion. We must examine here another piece of the mosaic of the ancient context, artificially breaking it apart from the whole: the context of tragic dance is the dance and poetry performance culture of ancient Greece.

Again, this is a big issue in itself, of which, for the purposes of this chapter, we can only have a short discussion. Scholars have written extensively on the place of dance in ancient Greek culture from an anthropological and sociological perspective, analyzing at the same time whatever information we can glean from the ancient sources regarding the actual formal elements. But since I am examining the evidence with the contemporary practitioner and audience in mind, focusing on what would be illuminating to our own experience of the chorus, without any desire for a reconstruction of the ancient performance, I will try again to focus this brief section on the spirit and philosophy behind dance and poetry performance.

Among others, Yianna Zarifi<sup>202</sup> and Stephen Lonsdale<sup>203</sup> stress the fundamental importance of dance in ancient culture for the survival of the community. Zarifi draws particular attention to the functional context of dance, such as agriculture, war, marriage and initiation. She also makes the point that the elements of choral performance, poetry, music and dance, were not conceived separately, but were intertwined from the beginning. Lonsdale's emphasis is anthropological, and focused on non-dramatic dancing and the role of dance in social and biological development, but nevertheless his conclusions are very useful in fleshing out the context of dancing in the tragic theatre: 'Involvement in choral performance either as participant or spectator is one of the ways one can reaffirm membership in the community.'<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>201</sup> Plat. *Laws* 2.654.

<sup>202</sup> Zarifi (2007).

<sup>203</sup> Lonsdale (1993).

<sup>204</sup> Lonsdale (1993) 27.

Looking at panhellenic choral culture that preceded and existed parallel to tragedy, John Herington emphasizes the competitive aspect of this culture and the fact that competitive poetry was performed, meaning that text, music and movement were fundamentally interconnected. Herington describes the City Dionysia as the culmination of a series of panhellenic festivals of poetry performed, *μουσικοί ἀγῶνες*, which included song, dance and mimesis.<sup>205</sup> There was a great range of types of poetry performed: ‘rhapsody, which is unaccompanied stichic verse, kitharody, which is solo singing of stichic or lyric verse to the singer’s own accompaniment of the lyre, and choral lyric, which is the performance of lyric verse by a choir, always accompanied instrumentally and usually reinforced by the power of dance.’<sup>206</sup> Thus the innovation of the Athenian tragedians, according to Herington, was the incorporation all types of performed lyric into one genre.

What can this tell us about music and dance? One thing we do have evidence for is the vast variety of metres in the Greek language, built on the basic principle of the combination of long and short syllables. The same principle most probably also defined the melody and dance, at least until the advent of New Music towards the end of the 5th century.<sup>207</sup> The Athenian dramatic poets were able to draw from this great wealth of metrical and generic variety of poetry and this, according to Herington, was one of the reasons the new genre of tragedy was so popular and also so complex technically.<sup>208</sup> If music follows the metre of the text, we have then a great variety of music and singing, that had to be combined with choreography, especially in the choral odes.<sup>209</sup> The dramatic contest between Aeschylus and Euripides in Aristophanes’ *Frogs* implies that each poet created his own innovation and that this combination of music, dance and drama was an experimental and developing process.

In lines 1300-1307 Aeschylus accuses Euripides of inappropriate choice of musical genres in his plays:

οὗτος δ’ ἀπὸ πάντων μέλι φέρει, πορνωδιῶν,  
 σκολίων Μελήτου, Καρικῶν αὐλημάτων,  
 θρήνων, χορειῶν. τάχα δὲ δηλωθήσεται.  
 ἐνεγκάτω τις τὸ λύριον. καίτοι τί δεῖ

<sup>205</sup> On this subject see also Griffith (2007).

<sup>206</sup> Herington (1985) 10.

<sup>207</sup> Herington (1985) 73.

<sup>208</sup> Herington (1985) 75.

<sup>209</sup> On metrical variety see also Hall (2012).

λύρας ἐπὶ τούτων; ποῦ 'στιν ἢ τοῖς ὀστράκοις  
αὕτη κροτοῦσα; δεῦρο Μοῦς' Εὐριπίδου,  
πρὸς ἥνπερ ἐπιτήδεια ταῦτ' ἄδειν μέλη.

But this fellow collects his honey from any old source - prostitutes' song, drinking-songs by Meletus, pipe-tunes and dirges and dances from Caria. I'll very soon make it plain. Bring me my lyre, someone - but on second thoughts, who needs a lyre for this job? Where's that girl who plays percussion with broken bits of pot? Come here, Muse of Euripides; you're the proper accompaniment for these songs to be sung to.

Aristophanes' *Frogs*, 1300-1307, transl. Alan H. Sommerstein 1996

Even with the exaggeration of Aristophanic comedy, we get a sense of the spirit of experimentation and the variety available to Euripides, and how tragedy developed in that respect. This evidence on style, combined with our evidence regarding rehearsal period, expense and competitiveness, leads us to assume that the dancing and singing dramatic chorus must have been a very impressive spectacle, even compared to what had come before, in panhellenic choral poetry contests. As for the particular characteristics of dance, we have some solid evidence on the formation of the tragic chorus, which it seems was rectangular. Some of the evidence even suggests that the formation was organized on the analogy of a hoplite battle line.<sup>210</sup>

We know also that choral dancing was separated according to dramatic genre. A fragment of the Pythagorean 4<sup>th</sup>-century philosopher Aristoxenus, often quoted by writers in antiquity, names the types of dance: 'The so-called *emmeleia* is a type of tragic dance, just as the so-called *sikinnis* is satyric and the so-called *cordax* is comic.' (Aristoxenus fr. 104, in Becker, *Anecdota Graeca* 1.101.17). Athenaeus in *Deipnosophists* 629-630 also lists many of the names of the Greek dances, mentioning also that the tragic dance is called *emmeleia*, which means 'harmonious'. But more interestingly, he gives us some theory on dance in drama and its ideal purpose and form.

οὐ κακῶς δὲ λέγουσιν οἱ περὶ Δάμωνα τὸν Ἀθηναῖον ὅτι καὶ τὰς ψᾶς καὶ τὰς ὀρχήσεις ἀνάγκη γίνεσθαι κινουμένης πῶς τῆς ψυχῆς: καὶ αἱ μὲν ἐλευθέριοι καὶ καλαὶ ποιοῦσι τοιαύτας, αἱ δ' ἐναντίαι τὰς ἐναντίας [...] καὶ γὰρ ἐν ὀρχήσει καὶ πορεία καλὸν μὲν εὐσχημοσύνη καὶ κόσμος, αἰσχροὺν δὲ ἄταξία καὶ τὸ φορτικόν. διὰ τοῦτο γὰρ καὶ ἐξ ἀρχῆς συνέταπτον οἱ ποιηταὶ τοῖς ἐλευθέροις τὰς ὀρχήσεις καὶ ἐχρῶντο τοῖς σχήμασι σημείοις

<sup>210</sup> Csapo and Slater (1994) 353.

μόνον τῶν ἄδομένων, τηροῦντες αἰεὶ τὸ εὐγενὲς καὶ ἀνδρῶδες ἐπ' αὐτῶν, ὅθεν καὶ ὑπορχήματα τὰ τοιαῦτα προσηγόρευον. εἰ δὲ τις ἀμέτρως διαθεῖη τὴν σχηματοποιίαν καὶ ταῖς ᾠδαῖς ἐπιτυγχάνων μηδὲν λέγοι κατὰ τὴν ὀρχησιν, οὗτος δ' ἦν ἀδόκιμος. [...] ἦν γὰρ τὸ τῆς ὀρχήσεως γένος τῆς ἐν τοῖς χοροῖς εὐσχημον τότε καὶ μεγαλοπρεπὲς καὶ ὥσανεὶ τὰς ἐν τοῖς ὅπλοις κινήσεις ἀπομιμούμενον. ὅθεν καὶ Σωκράτης ἐν τοῖς ποιήμασιν τοὺς κάλλιστα χορεύοντας ἀρίστους φησὶν εἶναι τὰ πολέμια λέγων οὕτως οἱ δὲ χοροῖς κάλλιστα θεοὺς τιμῶσιν, ἄριστοι ἐν πολέμῳ. σχεδὸν γὰρ ὥσπερ ἐξοπλισία τις ἦν ἡ χορεία καὶ ἐπίδειξις οὐ μόνον τῆς λοιπῆς εὐταξίας, ἀλλὰ καὶ τῆς τῶν σωμάτων ἐπιμελείας.

The students of Damon the Athenian put the case well when they say that songs and dances necessarily result when the soul is somehow in motion and that those ('songs and dances' or 'souls') that are freeborn and noble produce similar ('souls' or 'songs and dances'), and the opposite produce the opposite [...] For in dance or movement in general, decency and good order are beautiful, disorder and vulgarity ugly. This is why from the very beginning the poets arranged dances for free men and made use of dance-figures only to represent what was being sung, taking care always to preserve nobility and manliness in their movements [...] But if anyone arranged the dance movements beyond measure or in writing the songs said something that was not expressed in the dance he suffered disgrace. [...] Back then the kind of dance performed by the choruses was decorous and dignified and like an imitation of the movements of men in arms, and Socrates in his poems says that the finest dancers are the best warriors. He writes: 'Those who honour the gods most beautifully with choruses are the best in war.' For dancing is virtually like military manoeuvres and a display both of discipline in general and of a concern for bodily health.

Athenaeus *Deipnosophists* 628c-f, transl. Csapo and Slater, 1994.

We see here clearly the importance of the mimetic dimension, the connection with military training, and the emphasis on dignity and nobility in the dance, since dancing is character-forming and community building.

Plato in the *Laws* (814d-16e)<sup>211</sup> also stresses the mimetic dimension of dance, clearly stating that the movement expresses what is being said in the text: 'This is why the gestural representation of things said produced the entire art of dance.' He also, like Athenaeus, lays great emphasis on the connection between character and type of dance: 'one must necessarily suppose that there are two types of dance, that which imitates more beautiful bodies tending towards solemnity, and that of uglier bodies tending towards the worthless...' (Plato, *Laws* 814e). His analysis continues based on several sets of opposites: two types of serious, warlike and peaceful; of the unwarlike/peaceful there are again two

<sup>211</sup> Plato *Laws* 814d-16e, transl. Csapo and Slater, 1994.



types, one more pleasurable and one connected to work and increase of goods. (Plato, *Laws* 815a-b) There is also a duality in the way one expresses the movement: ‘the person who is more controlled and better trained in courage will make smaller movements, while the coward and the person untrained in temperance will provide greater and more violent changes of motion.’ Plato would have slaves and paid foreigners imitate the ridiculous and ugly in speech, song and dance, and never the citizens themselves. Such is the power of imitation, in his opinion, through dance and song and drama, for the formation of character and the prosperity of the community. Here we are reminded again of the passage in [Aristotle] *Problemata* 19.48 which, in the same vein argues that music also expresses class and character.<sup>212</sup> So in the philosophical discussions from antiquity we very often get several pairs of opposites as a structure of explaining the art of dance and song: warlike and peaceful, manly and effeminate, aristocratic and base, comic and tragic etc.

We can then imagine, concerning the dance of the tragic chorus, that, since it expressed character and had a strong mimetic dimension, it was organically connected to the dramatic identity of the chorus. Unlike today, song-and-dance was never incongruous in relation to the drama, regardless of the chorus’ ‘demographic’—wise old men, Greek warriors, exotic maidens. This harmonious blending of choral dramatic identity and choral song and dance seems to have been further enhanced by the appropriateness of the metre and choreography, connected to status and character, that went with each chorus. If we believe Plato and Athenaeus there isn’t very much room for variation or bending of the rules: Plato’s speaker would ensure that old dances handed down through tradition are not changed, but recorded and preserved the same for all time, by the lawgiver and the law-warden, for the good of the city and its citizens.

ὃ δὲ δεῖ τὸν μὲν νομοθέτην ἐξηγεῖσθαι τύποις, τὸν δὲ νομοφύλακα ζητεῖν τε, καὶ ἀνερευνησάμενον, μετὰ τῆς ἄλλης μουσικῆς τὴν ὄρχησιν συνθέντα καὶ νεύμαντα ἐπὶ πάσας ἐορτὰς τῶν θυσιῶν ἐκάστη τὸ πρόσφορον, οὕτω καθιερώσαντα αὐτὰ πάντα ἐν τάξει, τοῦ λοιποῦ μὴ κινεῖν μηδὲν μήτε ὀρχήσεως ἐχόμενον μήτε ᾠδῆς, ἐνταῖς δ’ αὐταῖς ἡδοναῖς ὡσαύτως τὴν αὐτὴν πόλιν καὶ πολίτας διάγοντας, ὁμοίους εἰς δύναμιν ὄντας, ζῆν εὖ τε καὶ εὐδαιμόνως.

These dances the lawgiver should describe in outline, and the Law-warden should search them out and, having investigated them, he should combine the dancing with the rest of the music, and assign what is proper of it to each of the sacrificial feasts, distributing it over all the feasts; and when

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<sup>212</sup> See above pp.70-71.

he has thus consecrated all these things in due order, he should thenceforth make no change in all that appertains to either dancing or singing, but this one and the same city and body of citizens should continue in one and the same way, enjoying the same pleasures and living alike in all ways possible, and so pass their lives happily and well.  
 Plato, *Laws* 816b-d transl. R.G. Bury 1967-68

But I feel that we must not endorse blindly this rather droll analysis of two conservative thinkers. The conflict in the *Frogs*, which I mentioned above, implies rather a spirit of experimentation, a wide range available and an influence from exotic forms in music, which also probably meant the same for developments in dance. Furthermore, the dynamic of the chorus' presence cannot have been limited to a subordinate ensemble restricted and confined by class and status to a fixed way of movement. We must take into account the musical and philosophical developments of the 5th century, that constantly explored the tension between individual and collective, between the people and the aristocratic hero. We must also consider the desire to impress during the competition, to present each year something extraordinary and win the prize. Just think of the chorus of the *Eumenides*, or the *Bacchae*, or Aeschylus' *Suppliants* or even the *Persians*. Drama is contrast and conflict. Perfect order and harmony was not and is not an advantage in this Athenian invention.

## 7. Conclusions

This chapter was written with the contemporary theatre practitioner in mind, in the belief that the more knowledge we have for what confounds us in practice, in this case the ancient Greek dramatic chorus, the more liberated we can be in our creativity. What I find inspirational as a practitioner and what I hope I have given a sense of in this brief overview, is the experimental spirit of tragedy, and thus the experimental and ever-evolving use of its various parts. There are two crucial aspects of this experimental spirit: as an art form tragedy is vitally connected to the changing social and philosophical concerns of the polis. It is the drama of the city, the centre of its most massive and prestigious festival. Secondly, from the beginning tragedy had an amazing ability to make use of other genres and incorporate them into its form. Whether it ever achieved a fixed form, *τὴν αὐτῆς φύσιν*, is a concern for the rule books that came later, and not for the fifth century tragedian. Thus each variation of the use of the chorus, each aesthetic or

philosophical or formal decision of the author is in a dialectical relationship with what came before and as such it has the potential to be radical, even revolutionary.

The details of the cultural mosaic surrounding the chorus can hopefully shed some light on the stranger aspects of this form, which are at the same time the most vital for defining the experience of the ancient audience: the *χορεία* culture, the degree of religiosity in the plays, the spirit of competition, the participation of amateur citizens. The emotional and intellectual connection between audience and performers, that which moves us, uplifts and enlightens us, that which has been the essence of theatre from its beginning until today, is what we are always striving to achieve. The chorus was a big part of that in the original performance of Greek drama. Karolos Koun's explanation of how we can hope to achieve this today when staging Greek tragedy seems to me to express perfectly the goal of this thesis:

Also [there is a solution to be found] in the direction of research on the wider implications of tragedy, those implications that could move the contemporary spectator. Since it is not possible for the spectator today to be moved by the same things that used to move him in the past, we need means that are culturally equivalent, equally alive and topical, like those of the original performance, in order to convey the emotional power of the play, and in order to provoke the spectator into participation.<sup>213</sup>

In the following chapters I will examine contemporary staging of the chorus under three headings. The first two roughly correspond with two of the fundamental and problematic characteristics of the chorus discussed so far, namely its ritual/religious function (Chapter 4) and its political/social function (Chapter 5). In Chapter 6 I will focus on what I consider a turning point in the staging of Greek drama, particularly in contemporary Greece, discussing very recent productions from both the fringe scene and the big festival scene. These productions are marked by aesthetic innovation, challenging expectations of convention and form, and often employ a post-modern dramaturgy that makes the presence and function of the chorus vital and exciting again. For these productions, the crucial part of the socio-political context is the global economic crisis that has had a huge impact on the practicalities of theatre production. This new economic reality has once

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<sup>213</sup> Koun (1987) 65. (my translation)

again brought to the surface one of the crucial differences between producing the tragic chorus then and now: the financial dimension. In all three chapters I am particularly interested in the cases where directors have succeeded in drawing inspiration from the chorus' classical origin and function, in order to create something new, original and theatrically compelling today.

## CHAPTER 4

### DIRECTING CHORAL RITUALS: MYSTAGOGY, RELIGION AND ECSTASY

#### 1. Introduction : the ritual dimension of the Greek chorus

As the chorus is most frequently the main agent of religious and ritual behaviour in the Attic drama, in this section I will examine how contemporary directors have found ‘solutions’ to the staging of the chorus and the integration of its dramatic identity in the action of the play, through an exploration of this behaviour in a new framework. As a result of the search for corresponding rituals by contemporary directors, especially in the last few decades, during which time the theatre’s interest in traditional cultures has increased, we have seen great innovations in the staging of the chorus. Such innovations, by focusing on a credible integration of the ritual and dramatic role of the chorus, staying within the emotional reality of the plot, may provide a solution to the ‘problem’ of choral singing and dancing, as behaviours that are codified, ceremonial, of high significance to the entire community, and marking an important community event.

Directors have also used a way of interpreting the chorus in a contemporary setting in what theorists call *retopicalisations*, which can provide fruitful contextualization of the religious role within contemporary settings and inspiration from living traditional cultures, through a deep understanding of corresponding elements with the play’s original context. The political dimension of the plays is often at the forefront of these ‘retopicalisations’<sup>214</sup>, but the religious and ritual aspects can also become a crucial focal point, especially when traditional cultures provide the new setting.

Thus the discussion of ritual will touch on avant-garde experiments, intercultural theatre, and also theatre that explores the traditional roots of a particular culture, and, especially in the case of an oppressed culture, often becomes political theatre, also called ‘theatre of protest’.<sup>215</sup> And although, strictly speaking, political productions are discussed in the next chapter, it is impossible not to touch on politics when discussing theatre that explores cultural identity, especially a suppressed cultural identity, through traditional religious and ritual patterns. Such theatre, through reference to living religious traditions,

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<sup>214</sup> See for example Hall (2007), Mee and Foley (2011).

<sup>215</sup> On such intercultural and culturally specific adaptations of Greek drama see especially Hall, Macintosh and Wrigley (2004), Goff and Simpson (2007) and Mee and Foley (2011).

brings the plays to the heart of a contemporary community faced with crisis, and allows them to see this crisis enacted before them, creating an emotional and historical context not unlike the original context of Attic drama, that dramatized the internal conflicts of the polis.

In the previous chapter we saw the multiple ways in which religious and ritual practice is an important part of the cultural context for understanding the original performances and the meaning of the plays. In this chapter I will examine how the contemporary experience of chorality, for audience and performers, can be re-invented through the use of ritual, always with the ambitious aim of opening new possibilities for the contemporary practitioner. There will be a contextualisation of ritual in contemporary adaptations of Greek Tragedy from the avant-garde experiments of the 1960s onwards. This will involve an exploration of the innovation and experimentation in theatrical form through the use of contemporary ritual and the borrowing from traditional cultures. The link between ritual, cult and politics will be a focal point. There will be a clear focus on the seamless and vital integration of singing and movement in the dramatic identity of the chorus and the aesthetic of the production as a whole. And finally, the spiritual participation of the audience, a *methexis*, achieved through the characterization of the chorus and through the fruitful exploration of contemporary Christian ritual.

The predominant case study will be one significant production from 1979: Euripides' *Suppliants* by the Cyprus Theatre Organisation, directed by Nikos Charalambous, which achieved the successful convergence of the ritual and the political. This production exemplifies the many aspects of the successful use of ritual in contemporary staging of Greek tragedy mentioned above such as the innovation and an appropriate retopicalisation within a cultural framework that energized both the ritual dimension of the chorus and the audience's *methexis*.

## **2. Ritual in theatre : some historical and cultural contexts**

### **i. The avant-garde's interest in ritual**

Aside from providing a possible 'solution' to the problem of the Greek chorus, the interest in ritual theatre, or the use of ritual in theatre, by contemporary directors, has an independent and exciting theatrical history of its own, largely connected to the theatrical avant-garde.

From the late 60s and early 70s we see a rise in the interest in intercultural theatre, that includes experiments with the cross-fertilization of cultures;<sup>216</sup> we see also the influence from events called happenings, in non-traditional venues, that aim at penetrating the ‘wall’ between audience and performers, and focus on the experience of the here and now rather than on traditional theatrical convention. The term *happening* was first used by the American painter and performance art pioneer Alan Kaprow in 1956. In Europe one of the most influential pioneers and theorists of happenings, Jean-Jacques Lebel, describes their subversive but also metaphysical power:

To this mercantile, state-controlled conception of culture, we oppose a combative art, fully conscious of its prerogatives: an art which does not shrink from stating its position, from direct action, from transmutation. The Happening interpolates actual experience directly into a mythical context. The Happening is not content merely with interpreting life; it takes part in its development within reality. This postulates a deep link between the actual and the hallucinatory, between real and imaginary.<sup>217</sup>

Environmental theatre is also a new and exciting trend in the 70s, with Richard Schechner the pre-eminent theorist and influential practitioner.<sup>218</sup> Environmental theatre stems from a similar impulse as happenings, as it creates a unified space for spectators and performers, focuses on the ‘experience’ of the performance for all involved, does away with traditional theatrical trappings and focuses on a sense of communion between performers and audience. And of course parallel to all these innovations, and very much connected to them, is the rise of performance art, which has influenced traditional theatre artists and generations of audience members. Performance art, happenings and environmental theatre have influenced generations of theatre artists and audiences and continue to have a lasting impact on contemporary theatre. But the 60s and 70s were the heyday of these forms, because of the historical moment, specifically the great socio-political movements that flourished in the late 60s in Western countries, that gave rise to

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<sup>216</sup> It should be mentioned here that in recent scholarship the term ‘intercultural’ is being replaced by the term ‘interweaving’, which describes a different process of contact between different cultures through art. The emphasis is on the global sociopolitical and economic context in which cultures meet with each other through performance and on questioning fixed concepts of cultural identity. See especially <http://www.geisteswissenschaften.fu-berlin.de/en/v/interweaving-performance-cultures/>.

<sup>217</sup> Lebel (1994) 271.

<sup>218</sup> Schechner’s *Environmental Theatre* was published in 1973, containing new techniques in actor training and remaining highly influential for many decades. It was re-published in 1994.

political theatre and political activism through the arts. Artists were redefining the role of art in society, the way it was presented and the effect it could have on the public and civic life in general.<sup>219</sup>

In this climate of the 60s and 70s there is a great interest in theatre that uses ritual. This interest continues to this day, especially among theatre artists who explore the performing arts of traditional cultures, and often among theatre artists interested in the contemporary interpretation of Greek drama. Helene Foley points out some essential characteristics, shared by ritual and Greek drama, that contribute to this artistic ‘marriage’:

Ritual, like tragic theatre, involves staging, symbolic gestures, dressing up, and role -playing. Both ritual and drama may offer an experience of liminality that establishes or confirms links between past and present, individual and society, as well as among man, god and nature.<sup>220</sup>

In the previous chapter we saw the influential studies on the ritual roots of Greek tragic theatre that also came out during the 70s and undoubtedly influenced theatre practice in the same period.<sup>221</sup> This theatrical interest in ritual takes diverse forms, according to the particular goals of each production and director. In the same way that cult and ritual affected the cultural context of the original performance in many different ways, today there are several aspects or effects of ritual that can be explored or enhanced, alone or in combination, according to the ideological basis of the production.

One reason for using ritual, of interest to artists with spiritual aims in their work, may be that impulse connected to Peter Brook’s search for a holy theatre, a theatre that brings us in ‘contact with a sacred invisibility.’<sup>222</sup> The early years of Brook’s theatrical history-shaping innovations and research coincide with the rise in interest in intercultural theatre, ritual theatre, and environmental theatre in the 1960s. This contact with the metaphysical world is something which, as he writes, was at the root of theatre from its ancient beginnings, but has been lost as theatre developed into what he calls a *deadly* form, disconnected from its original impulse.<sup>223</sup> One of his most acclaimed productions,

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<sup>219</sup> See especially Hall, Macintosh and Wrigley (2004) for the developments in contemporary performance of Greek drama in this aesthetic and political climate.

<sup>220</sup> Foley (1985) 63.

<sup>221</sup> See Fischer-Lichte in Hall, Macintosh and Wrigley (2004) for the connection between anthropological research on ritual and Greek drama in the 70s and corresponding interest in theatre practice.

<sup>222</sup> Brook [1968] (1990) 54.

<sup>223</sup> Brook [1968] (1990) 50-51.



*Orghast*<sup>224</sup>, which draws on several Greek myths and tragic texts, but mostly *Prometheus* and *Persians*, used an invented language, ‘Orghast’, which would be a ‘new international theatrical language’<sup>225</sup> with the aim of transcending rational understanding and communicating with the audience through sound. Through this non-verbal communication the goal was to create an experience of an almost metaphysical communion between audience and spectators.<sup>226</sup> *Orghast* was performed in two parts. Part I was performed in Persepolis and Part II, which included all the choral and lyric sections of Aeschylus’ *Persians*, was performed at Naqsh-e-Rustam, the mountain cliff where Darius I and Xerxes I are actually buried: a real-life sacred space. The famous scene of the ghost raising of King Darius thus became in the most literal sense ‘site-specific’<sup>227</sup> and for the spectator as close to a ‘real’ ritual as it could be. Edith Hall quotes the *Financial Times* reviewer, Andrew Porter, who witnessed this momentous theatrical event and describes it in the language of ritual:

the playgoer who has entered into *Orghast* has passed through fire, and can never be the same again.<sup>228</sup>

There are those directors who are more interested in the creation of a sense of community in an alienated society (which of course is a goal not unrelated to the previous one). Helene Foley notes this tendency among avant-garde dramatists<sup>229</sup> with socio-political goals in their work:

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<sup>224</sup> *Orghast*, a production of the International Centre for Theatre Research, written by Peter Brook and Ted Hughes and first performed in 1971 at the Festival of Arts in Shiraz-Persepolis.

<sup>225</sup> Hall (2007).

<sup>226</sup> Smith (1972).

<sup>227</sup> Pearson and Shanks offer one of the most comprehensive definitions: ‘Site-specific performances are conceived for, mounted within and conditioned by the particulars of found spaces, existing social situations or locations [...] They rely, for their conception and their interpretation, upon the complex coexistence, superimposition and interpenetration of a number of narratives and architectures, historical and contemporary, of two basic orders: that which is of the site, its fixtures and fittings, and that which is brought to the site, the performance and its scenography. [...] They are inseparable from their sites, the only contexts within which they are intelligible. Performance recontextualises such sites: it is the latest occupation of a location at which other occupations—their material traces and histories—are still apparent [...] The multiple meanings and readings of performance and site intermingle, amending and compromising once another.’ (2001) 23.

<sup>228</sup> Hall (2007).

<sup>229</sup> The term avant-garde is used in this thesis to denote artists who are innovative, experimental, break with established norms and create work that is ground-breaking and creates new movements or shifts from current aesthetics. For a more detailed reference to the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s many avant-garde movements see chapter 5 of this thesis.

[I]t is no accident that modern Avant-garde dramatists, in their attempts to revive the power of the theatre in an 'alienated' society, have looked to ritual forms for inspiration.<sup>230</sup>

Ritual includes a set of actions that belong to the communal knowledge of a collective. They exist to mark a pivotal event, they are codified and shared, and as such can create bonds among the performers but also between the performers and the on-lookers, who, through their presence and observation, become participants in the ritual itself. This last point is an essential part of ritual. The anthropologist and theatre artist Richard Schechner's work on ritual theatre focused especially on this dynamic.<sup>231</sup> His extensive work on this subject should be briefly mentioned here, especially since he has written on the important similarities between ritual and performance, in his search for the 'efficacy of performance as a ritual experience.'<sup>232</sup> The following example speaks specifically about initiation rites:

Looking at the whole seven-phase performance sequence, I find a pattern analogous to initiation rites. A performance involves a separation, a transition, and an incorporation [...] Each of these phases is carefully marked. In initiations people are transformed permanently, whereas in most performances the transformations are temporary (transportations). Like initiations, performances 'make' one person into another. Unlike initiations, performances usually see to it that the performer gets his own self back. To use Van Gennep's categories, training, workshop, rehearsal, and warm-ups are preliminary, rites of separation. The performance itself is liminal, analogous to the rites of transition. Cool-down and aftermath are postliminal, rites of incorporation.<sup>233</sup>

Throughout his work Schechner also insists on the importance of audience participation for both ritual and theatre.<sup>234</sup>

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<sup>230</sup> Foley (1985) 90.

<sup>231</sup> See Zeitlin in Hall, Macintosh and Wrigley (2004) for an overview of Schechner's anthropological and theatrical exploration of ritual.

<sup>232</sup> Shephard (1991) quoted in Zeitlin (2004) 57.

<sup>233</sup> Schechner (1985) 20-21.

<sup>234</sup> See for example Zeitlin in Hall, Macintosh and Wrigley (2004) for the importance of interaction between audience and performers in Schechner's version of the *Bacchae*, *Dionysus in 69*, but also for the challenges and failures of the experiment. For example, the intense and sexually charged interaction with the audience, structured around a theatrical ritual invented by the production, had results on the audience that could not have been predicted and were disruptive to the performance.

No theater performance functions detached from its audience [...] Spectators are very aware of the moment when a performance takes off. A 'presence' is manifest, something has 'happened.' The performers have touched or moved the audience, and some kind of collaboration, collective special theatrical life, is born.<sup>235</sup>

Of course ritual practice is traditionally at the heart of community life and also marks a change for participants as well as observers and a communion between them. The difference with theatrical performance, according to Schechner, is one of degree.

We can see the importance of ritual in the work of another influential artist of the late 20th century, Jerzy Grotowski. A central part of his theatrical manifesto is the communion between actor and spectator, aiming to rediscover this dynamic of ancient theatre when it was still part of religion.<sup>236</sup> Part of this exploration is the merging of the identities of the performer and the role. This is a brutal 'collision', as the actor goes through a painful process of 'encounter' with himself in order to find the character.<sup>237</sup> Here ritual is part of the training, of the preparation/rehearsal as well as of the performance itself, and is extremely demanding of the performer, physically and psychologically. Performance is referred to with terms such as 'atonement' and 'sacrifice'.<sup>238</sup> As such, this method is rarely practiced in its pure form by practitioners today, but it has left its mark on the theatrical legacy of the 20th century.

But even in more 'main-stream' acting in our contemporary, secular world, actors often speak of moments in performance when the character and the plot 'take over'. Sometimes, actors say, the best performances are those after which they don't remember many details. There is a 'flow' of energy, they are 'in the moment'. However, in these moments actors are always able to have part of their brain concentrated on the practicalities of stage convention, on the realities of the playhouse and the audience—an ability famously discussed by Plato in *Ion*.

In this dialogue with rhapsode Ion, Socrates first establishes the divine nature of inspiration, for poets and performers alike, which is a divine ecstasy, a possession (θεία δὲ δύναμις ἣ σε κινεῖ, 533d) and then proceeds to compare the poets when composing in

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<sup>235</sup> Schechner (1985) 10-11.

<sup>236</sup> Grotowski [1968] (1991) 19, 22.

<sup>237</sup> Grotowski [1968] (1991) 55.

<sup>238</sup> Grotowski [1968] (1991) 34.

inspiration, and by extension the rhapsodes, with Bacchants or Corybantes during the ecstasy of their ritual (533e-534a).

But then Socrates points out a paradox, which I feel continues to be a fundamental truth about acting: Socrates asks Ion about his state of mind and his awareness of his surroundings when he is performing:

ὅταν εὖ εἴπῃς ἔπη καὶ ἐκπλήξῃς μάλιστα τοὺς θεωμένους [...] τότε πότερον ἔμφρων εἶ ἢ ἔξω σαυτοῦ γίγνη καὶ παρὰ τοῖς πράγμασιν οἶεταί σου εἶναι ἢ ψυχὴ οἷς λέγεις ἐνθουσιάζουσα, ἢ ἐν Ἰθάκῃ οὖσιν ἢ ἐν Τροίᾳ ἢ ὅπως ἂν καὶ τὰ ἔπη ἔχῃ; (535b-c)

when you give a good recitation and specially thrill your audience, [...], are you then in your senses, or are you carried out of yourself, and does your soul in an ecstasy suppose herself to be among the scenes you are describing, whether they be in Ithaca, or in Troy, or as the poems may chance to place them?

Ion replies by describing the physical manifestations of emotion that he experiences while performing:

[...] ἐγὼ γὰρ ὅταν ἐλεινόν τι λέγω, δακρύων ἐμπίμπλантаί μου οἱ ὀφθαλμοί: ὅταν τε φοβερὸν ἢ δεινόν, ὀρθαὶ αἱ τρίχες ἴστανται ὑπὸ φόβου καὶ ἡ καρδία πηδᾷ. (535c)

[...] when I relate a tale of woe, my eyes are filled with tears; and when it is of fear or awe, my hair stands on end with terror, and my heart leaps.

Socrates points out that this is not the behaviour of a man “in his senses” (ἔμφρονα), to feel fear and pain and to cry, without any harm being done to him, while decked out in luxurious costume and standing before thousands of friendly people, in the middle of a festival. (535d)

But the great paradox is that Ion, as he admits to Socrates, while in the state described above, is still very aware of the effect he has on his audience, is able to discern their emotions, and this awareness causes specific feelings in him too:

καθορῶ γὰρ ἐκάστοτε αὐτοὺς ἄνωθεν ἀπὸ τοῦ βήματος κλάοντάς τε καὶ δεινὸν ἐμβλέποντας καὶ συνθαμβοῦντας τοῖς λεγομένοις. δεῖ γάρ με καὶ σφόδρ' αὐτοῖς τὸν νοῦν προσέχειν· ὥς ἐὰν μὲν κλάοντας αὐτοὺς καθίσω, αὐτὸς γελάσομαι ἀργύριον λαμβάνων, ἐὰν δὲ γελῶντας, αὐτὸς κλαύσομαι ἀργύριον ἀπολλύς. (535e)

for I look down upon them from the platform and see them at such moments crying and turning awestruck eyes upon me and yielding to the amazement of my tale. For I have to pay the closest attention to them; since, if I set them crying, I shall laugh myself because of the money I take, but if they laugh, I myself shall cry because of the money I lose.<sup>239</sup>

This cannot seem strange to us today, when acting teachers and directors will often talk to actors about ‘being in the moment’, that is being in a way transported by what is happening on stage and responding to it ‘naturally’, while at the same time demanding of them precision in rhythm, ‘hitting their marks’, ‘finding their light’, knowing where the laughs are, and much more.

In fact, actors can do both. They can be in two states at the same time, and they can experience an intense transformation, the effect of a theatrical ritual, while saying the same lines every night and following a strict pattern of movement. This, according to Schechner, is a universal truth about human nature, acting and performance of ritual. Humans are unique in their ability to carry multiple identities at the same time.<sup>240</sup> As far as the technique, or method, he finds essential similarities here too: ‘the techniques of ‘getting there’, of preparing the performer to perform, are much the same for the deer dancer as for the Balinese trance dancer or for an actor playing a role in New York: observation, practice, imitation, correction, repetition.’<sup>241</sup>

## **ii. Potential problem: cultural appropriation and ritual out of context**

Now the obvious question is this: Since religious ritual performed by the community (not by an appointed priest for example) is more often a characteristic of community life in traditional cultures of the past, or outside the Western world, what are the dangers of imitating ritual today, outside its original cultural context? Can it work today in non-traditional societies, especially in the West? The greatest danger for a contemporary theatre artist is to imitate the form of the ritual, detached from its essential meaning for the community of participants. And in the case of Greek drama it may be

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<sup>239</sup> All translations of *Ion* by Lamb (1925).

<sup>240</sup> Schechner (1985) 4.

<sup>241</sup> Schechner (1985) 5.

very tempting to do this, in order to ‘solve’ problems such as the chorus’ religious behaviour, its singing and dancing, or the strong divine presence in some plays. However the deeper meaning of these authentic-looking ritual forms is often something that has been long lost.

To give an example from the modern Greek world: in chapter 3 we saw that when Margaret Alexiou wrote the first edition of *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition* in 1974, she was able to go around Greece and actually witness ritual lament. However, during the last thirty years, oral collective performance in Greece has been virtually eliminated. There are some exceptions in remote rural areas; in 2005, my grandparents were buried in their small village in Thessaly, with a full chorus of *μοιρολογίτρες*, professional dirge singers. But when we take into consideration the majority of our audience today, we can safely assume that such an experience is not part of their everyday life, especially if they are people under forty brought up in urban areas. And thus its deeper significance for the community and for the connection with the metaphysical cannot so easily be re-enacted or communicated.

The connection to an oral, ritual past is complex of course. There are still certain elements of the Greek tradition that can touch an audience deeply and they mostly have to do with music. Byzantine music, evocative of the Orthodox liturgy, traditional music from Greece, from the Mediterranean and the Balkans, still resonates with Greek and Cypriot audiences and can have emotional impact in performance. Music itself can give authority to choral utterance, through a complex web of images and sounds that can still evoke a collective past: a church service for some, a traditional rite in a village somewhere that still lies sleeping in our memory, an instance, a memory of communal connection through learning a traditional folk dance at school. But can these experiences, characterized mostly by nostalgia, come close to the living sense of communal identity experienced by the audience in classical Athens, that was very real, very urgent, with strong political and ideological connotations?

There is another issue, which has been discussed extensively in the context of postcolonial theory and its application in the arts: the appropriation of elements of an oppressed traditional culture by artists originating from a colonial power, i.e. usually white Westerners. For example, much has been written about the problematic politics of *Gospel at Colonus* being created by two white men, Breuer and Telson, who appropriated

an important expression of African-American culture, the gospel musical, which is originally a form expressing revolution against white oppression.<sup>242</sup>

On the other hand, many directors and theorists, like Schechner and Brook, have shown how complex and fruitful this cross-fertilization of traditional performance cultures and ritual practices can be for contemporary theatre, on the condition that it is based on serious and respectful research, on the exploration of principles and not just on superficial 'borrowing' and formal imitation. Ariane Mnouchkine, for example, with her multi-ethnic companies, extensive research in many performance cultures and strong political basis for her productions, has created extraordinary worlds on stage, which, as in *Les Atrides*,<sup>243</sup> complement the metaphysical and other-worldly quality of Greek drama.

Peter Brook urges caution in this matter, while at the same time insisting that its exploration is necessary today:

Certainly, we still wish to capture in our arts the invisible currents that rule our lives, but our vision is now locked to the dark end of the spectrum [...] Even if the theatre had in its origins rituals that made the invisible incarnate, we must not forget that apart from certain Oriental theatres these rituals have been either lost or remain in seedy decay [...] Of course, today as at all times, we need to stage true rituals, but for rituals that would make theatre-going an experience that feeds our lives true forms are needed. These are not at our disposal, and conferences and resolutions will not bring them our way.<sup>244</sup>

Of course we know that Brook devoted most of his theatre career to intercultural theatre and to travelling around the world to research traditional cultures, to this purpose. It may also seem that his research is based on a personal belief in the metaphysical realm, and how it can be accessible through both ritual and theatre. But even without a religious or metaphysical foundation, the importance of ritual for the power of theatrical experience, for both audience and performer, is worth exploring. We are talking about the bonding of

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<sup>242</sup> For an analysis of *Gospel* in the context of post-colonial discourse, a review of reactions regarding appropriation and a critical view of Breuer's 'accidental imperialism' see McConnell (2014). Goff and Simpson (2007) view Breuer's goal in the play as an attempt to achieve catharsis and reconciliation between blacks and whites (178-218).

<sup>243</sup> *Les Atrides* by Théâtre du Soleil, was created over the years 1990-1992 and is a tetralogy based on Aeschylus' *Oresteia* and Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*. All four plays were directed by Ariane Mnouchkine, music was composed by Jean-Jacques Lemêtre, set design by Guy-Claude François with sculptures by Erhard Stiefel, and costumes by Nathalie Thomas et Marie-Hélène Bouvet. *Iphigénie à Aulis* was translated by Jean Bollack, Agamemnon and Les Choéphores were translated by Ariane Mnouchkine and Les Euménides was translated by Hélène Cixous.

<sup>244</sup> Brook [1968] (1990) 50-51.

a community, cultural memory, emotional energy, being transported by the events on stage to another way of perceiving the world.

### **iii. Ritual, Religion and Revolution: Postcolonial adaptations**

When theatre artists do have the opportunity to use ritual elements in Greek drama within the cultural context of a living traditional culture successfully, we may draw some conclusions: first of all, the power of the performance depends on the audience being able to understand the coded meaning of a ritual, its purpose, focus and symbolism, as well as the 'rules' governing the behaviour of those participating and those observing. A performance using traditional ritual doesn't work in the same way without the original audience and the historical context. When it works, it's as if a missing piece of the puzzle from the original context of the play, and the chorus, is found. Thus, in adaptations with emphasis on a particular historical context, the target audience is highly aware and sensitive to these traditional ritual elements. If the ritual is an invention of the particular production, then it has to be clearly communicated and the audience has to enter into the right frame of mind- this is a dangerous path that can backfire, as it did, for example, in Schechner's *Dionysus in 69* (see note 234 above, p.113).

Secondly, some productions have gone as far as to incorporate a contemporary religious content and form for the entire play, a content and form which somehow corresponds with the religious content and form of the original text, as in the case of *Gospel at Colonus*, discussed below.<sup>245</sup> Thirdly, in combination with the political plots of the plays, that is, Greek tragedy's preoccupation with civic issues, such as political power, religious authority and gender conflict, the use of traditional ritual can be political and revolutionary. In these cases, it would be very rare for the director not to place great emphasis on the collective of the chorus: usually the story these directors want to tell is not one of personal but of civic conflict, therefore the power of the collective is of pivotal significance. With regard to ritual, we may often see in these productions that the authority of the voice of the chorus is connected to religion and to mythical references in the text, as proof of a deeper knowledge and broader understanding of the situation.

In Helene Foley's and Erin B. Mee's *Antigone on the Contemporary World Stage* we have a wealth of examples where ritual theatre within its traditional living culture can

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<sup>245</sup> See pp.122-123 of this thesis.



be a highly political, even revolutionary act.<sup>246</sup> For example Mee gives an account of two *Antigones* produced in Manipur, in which traditional ritual elements take on a political meaning, since they are part of living traditional culture that asserts itself against colonialism. As Mee explains here, in India theatre has been used as a powerful anti-colonial tool after the Independence, as artists were trying to shake off the Western prototype imposed on them by the British empire, through the creation of a more 'indigenous', non-realistic style.<sup>247</sup> Manipur's case is even more complicated because they are doubly oppressed: they want to assert their independence both from the British Empire and from India. The two *Antigones* discussed by Mee emphasize Manipuri culture and this is an aesthetic as well as a political choice, in the context of *Antigone's* anti-establishment, revolutionary dynamic. For example, in the 1995 production of Jean Anouilh's *Antigone*, directed by Nongthombam Premchand and translated into Manipuri by Arambam Somorendro, there is use of imagery reminiscent of or clearly representing Manipuri deities, in their original as opposed to their Hinduized form, significantly connecting them with the figure of Antigone herself.<sup>248</sup> In the 2004 production of Sophocle's *Antigone* directed by Kshetrimayum Jugindro Singh, the chorus' musical lament for the deaths of Eteocles and Polyneices, is a keening reminiscent of natasankirtana, 'a lyrical form of devotional singing accompanies a ritual journey into the ancestral world'.<sup>249</sup> In this way the use of ritual adds another layer of interpretation of the play: while the chorus is mourning Polyneices using a traditional Manipuri musical religious form, Creon enters to give his edict banning Polyneices' burial, as an oppressive ruler going against the people and its ancestral customs. Incorporating traditional music and performance elements in these productions, especially in the choral odes, serves a dual purpose: first, it showcases indigenous cultural heritage, native rituals and customs. Secondly, but relatedly, it aims to create a theatre that is more interdisciplinary, includes music and dance, which is closer to native tradition than to the colonial, text-based theatre imposed by the British. Greek drama, which originally was imposed as a form of cultural colonialism from the West, thus becomes a vehicle for showcasing native performance traditions.<sup>250</sup>

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<sup>246</sup> Mee and Foley (2011).

<sup>247</sup> Mee (2011) 116-117.

<sup>248</sup> Mee (2011) 111.

<sup>249</sup> Mee (2011) 120.

<sup>250</sup> Mee (2011) 120-121.

In the same book, Moira Fradinger gives an account of Felix Morisseau-Leroy's *Antigone* in Haiti in the 1950s, *Antigon an Kreyol*, in Haitian Creole. French was the official language at the time. The director used the Haitian voodoo religion in the staging, although Catholicism was the official religion. This was a historical performance that actually played a significant role in legitimizing Creole language and culture.<sup>251</sup> The use of Haitian voodoo in the staging is a theatrical choice that provided an effective contemporary context for the religious side of Greek tragedy, and of theatre in general, through formal similarities such as the impersonation of spirits, the 'crisis of possession', the chorus, and the use of dance and song.<sup>252</sup> At the same time, it is a political act, because of voodoo's revolutionary, political streak: it is the religion connected to the rebellions of African slaves, its rites aimed at giving them unity and strength.<sup>253</sup>

Similarly, the Taiwanese *Antigone*<sup>254</sup>, discussed by Dongshin Chang in the same edited collection, used traditional folk and ritual elements, music, culturally specific staging elements, and the Taiwanese dialect. For example, the staging of the choral ode to Dionysus was inspired from traditional religious processions in Taiwan, while traditional wedding ritual semiology and symbolism was used in the scene in which Antigone is taken to her death. The use of Taiwanese dialect, which the Nationalist government replaced with Mandarin as the official language in 1949, is in itself a political act, and goes hand in hand with choosing to use traditional elements, of performance and of religion, in the production.<sup>255</sup>

This powerful connection between the ritual and the political in such contemporary adaptations is not unlike the connection of public and religious life of Athens in the 5th century BCE. The political significance of religious actions, as well as the tensions created between these two spheres, the secular and the divine, was a major part of tragedy's content and context.

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<sup>251</sup> Fradinger (2011) 130.

<sup>252</sup> Fradinger (2011) 133.

<sup>253</sup> Fradinger (2011) 143-144.

<sup>254</sup> Sophocles' *Antigone*, directed by Po-Shen Lu and produced by Tainan Jen Theatre, 2001.

<sup>255</sup> Chang (2011) 152.

#### iv. Christianity and Tragedy

In a discussion of productions in the West, Christianity is of course a crucial part of the contemporary religious context. On the one hand, drawing parallels between Christian theology and the theology of tragedy is rife with problems. At the same time, a religious context that makes sense to a contemporary audience may offer great solutions to the problem of the chorus' integration and role.

The *Gospel at Colonus* must be mentioned here again, as perhaps the most famous Christian adaptation of tragedy, both in the U.S. and internationally. In Chapter 2 of this thesis I discussed the successful treatment of the chorus in *Gospel*, which was due to a thoroughly convincing contemporary recontextualization. Earlier on in this chapter the production was mentioned in the context of the dangers of cultural appropriation.<sup>256</sup> In this section I will focus the issue of metaphysics and ritual. McConnell, like other critics, has pointed out that 'this is one of the great contributions that the problematic task of turning classical Greek metaphysics into Christian redemptive metaphysics can offer.'<sup>257</sup>

On the other hand, the discrepancies between the theology of Sophocles and those of *Gospel* have also been widely discussed. The main differences with the Sophoclean theology and tone of the play show that a great amount of modifications and adjustments to the text was needed to fit the story of Oedipus' final days into a Christian setting: the Christian elements of redemption and making peace with death, twin cornerstones of the belief-systems of all Christian denominations, received great focus in Breuer's production but do not have an ancient Greek parallel. Oedipus does not curse his sons in *Gospel*. Rather, paternal curses and disastrous family feuds, so important in the Theban saga, became deserved divine rage of the deified Oedipus in *Gospel*. The identification of Oedipus with a Christ figure, who goes down to the underworld and comes back, to rise to the heavens, is also very different from the original, in which there is no apotheosis of Oedipus. The best he can do is to become a spirit of Colonus. That is not to deny the production's great merit, as an outstanding piece of theatre, largely based on the choral collective, that fascinated audiences around the world. These observations highlight the challenges of realizing the religious dimension of Greek tragedy on the contemporary stage.

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<sup>256</sup> For the political dimension of this production as a commentary on contemporary American race politics see Goff & Simpson (2007), 178-218.

<sup>257</sup> McConnell (2014) 489.

In a similarly bold reimagining with a strong religious setting, the Experimental Stage of the National Theatre of Greece presented an adaptation of both Oedipus plays, in a performance entitled *Oedipus Tyrannos epi Kolono*,<sup>258</sup> which was characterized in the press as a ‘Protochristian ritual.’<sup>259</sup> Under the direction of Sotiris Hatzakis the plays were presented as religious events. The set was evocative of a liturgy throughout, with thin yellow Greek Orthodox candles scattered all over the earth-covered floor, real church pews where the actors sat, incense, tree branches with votive offerings framing the playing area and a wooden table in the middle evoking the Christian altar, where wine and bread were placed. The intimate black-box theatre of the Experimental Stage, with its back wall covered with votive lights, enhanced the sense of communally shared ritual. At the same time the performance was interspersed with Greek folk elements inspired by the pagan origins of some existing rural traditions. Some rituals were invented for the performance but were also grounded in recognizable rituals and customs of rural Greece: for example, in a ceremonial transition from the one play to the next, Oedipus’ semi-naked body was ritually transformed, by being covered with flour from a traditional sifting basket held by two women, as he stood on a platform. The idea of transformation, a crucial component of ritual, was central to the *mise-en-scène*. In this production all the characters in turn became chorus members, entering and leaving the main action at the beginning and end of the *epeisodia*, with simple on-stage transformations, such as a covering of the head, but with a palpable sense of participating in a ritual. The director comments on the use of the chorus: ‘The chorus is a womb that gives birth to the protagonists, and reclaims them at the end of each episode. But gradually in “Colonus” it is reduced, and becomes a rhapsode who sings the *stasima*.’<sup>260</sup> This rhapsode leaning on the church pew was of course evocative of the Orthodox chanter (ψάλτης), despite being performed by a woman, Lydia Koniordou. Hatzakis is interested in the parallel between the sufferings of Oedipus and the passion of Christ,<sup>261</sup> and thus follows a structure of a passion play combined with elements of Homeric rhapsodic performance, Greek folk ritual and tragic drama. In such a setting, the religious content of the odes, instead of

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<sup>258</sup> *Oedipus Tyrannos epi Kolono*, directed by Sotiris Hatzakis, set and costume design by Dionysis Fotopoulos, music composed by Takis Farazis, choreography by Apostolia Papadamaki, lighting design by Antonis Panagiotopoulos, National Theatre of Greece, Experimental Stage, 2002.

<sup>259</sup> Aggelikopoulos (2002).

<sup>260</sup> Hadziantoniou (2002).

<sup>261</sup> Hadziantoniou (2002).

creating awkwardness, was instrumental for the coherence of the acting ensemble and for the creation of a religious atmosphere.

This production, like *Gospel*, also reveals the potential for a religious exploration of the Oedipus story in different cultures. Moreover, these two productions have certain structural elements in common that are in keeping with the strong religious atmosphere. First of all, the element of the narrator, whether a preacher, or a rhapsode or a chorus reminiscent of Greek Orthodox chanters, is integral to the structure. Furthermore, they share the conventions of a folk happening, in the sense of a folk or traditional re-enactment such as a medieval enactment of the passion of the Christ, or the symbolic (or mystical) enactments that happen during a Christian liturgy: for example, the sense of impersonating a character is loose, since the actors take on several roles with little external transformation and emphasis on the ensemble dynamic—in *Gospel* the role of Oedipus was split between an actor narrating it and the Blind Boys of Alabama singing it, while in the Greek production acclaimed tragedian Lydia Koniordou took on several roles, including Jocasta and Teiresias, while all seven performers participated in the chorus.

Like the Breuer version, this adaptation was criticized for ‘simplifying’ and reducing the philosophical content of Sophocles’ plays through the imposition of a Christian narrative, with the philosophy of *Oedipus Tyrannos* being the greater casualty of the two plays in that respect. For example, one critic strongly disagrees with the directorial approach, finding the vehicle of a folk Christian ritual/happening unrelated to the philosophical breadth and depth of the two Sophoclean tragedies, and unsuited to the sophisticated dramatic technique of Greek drama.<sup>262</sup>

Christian suffering, martyrdom and courage, although with a completely different philosophical foundation than the suffering of tragic heroes, has a long history of appearing in tragic revivals in the modern era. The modern-day theatrical tradition of interpreting certain heroines such as Antigone through the Christian narrative of martyrdom and purity can be traced back to the theatre of the Victorian era. One such notable example is the 1854 production of *Antigone* in Covent Garden to music by Mendelssohn, which met with enormous success.<sup>263</sup> It was the first British translation of

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<sup>262</sup> Thymeli (2002).

<sup>263</sup> The music was written 1841 by Felix Medelssohn, to accompany a production of Sophocles’ *Antigone* staged by Ludwig Tieck, the text based on Johann Jakob Christian Donner. The first production took place at the New Palace, Potsdam. For the 1854 English language production at Covent Garden the text was translated from the German by William Bartholomew. It was conducted by George Alexander Macfarren.

a play that was destined to become the most frequently performed tragedy in the modern world. This production was a milestone in the production history of Greek tragedy in Europe but also germinated the trend of identification of Christian Victorian morality with Antigone's perceived virtue and adherence to religious law.<sup>264</sup> An even earlier example of a Christianized tragic heroine, this time a Catholic Nun/Iphigenia figure, who is in service to the Virgin Mary, is given by Hall (2013). This character comes from the Renaissance drama *Oreste* (circa 1520) by the Florentine Giovanni Rucellai, a 'neoclassical dramatic fantasia on the theme of proto-Christian heroism'<sup>265</sup> written in the context of the Ottoman threat becoming increasingly felt in Christian Europe.<sup>266</sup> Naturally such approaches simplify the central conflicts in the plays and gloss over their ethical conundrums, since, in the cultural context in which these plays were produced, Christianity as the measure of morality and ethics supersedes everything else.

It is easy to understand why Christianity, and monotheism in general, offer a limited prism through which to view religious behaviour in Attic drama, especially with reference to the afterlife, the relationship between man and god, and most of all with the moral landscape that governs human relationships. The conflict between religious and state issues, for example, is expressed in various ways in tragedy, involving the transgression of secular rulers, the power of divination, the corruption of the clergy, and also, what humans can learn from myth. But this issue takes a completely different tone in the history of the Christian European West, where issues of dogma, proselytism, religious freedom, church power, persecution of 'heretics', witch-hunting, Christian martyrdom, and so on, have historically marked the relationship between organized religion and civic life. In Greek tragedy the gods do demand respect, and their priests do warn rulers against transgression, but the sheer number of gods, their multiple, complex, often unfathomable motives, create a different landscape. The one certain 'sin' is hubris, but that can be as much an issue of secular morality—one person behaves hubristically towards another—as a religious issue—one person behaves hubristically towards a god. In their relations with humans, gods seem often cruel, self-serving, or vengeful, for example Athena and Poseidon in the *Trojan Women* and Dionysus in the *Bacchae*. Sometimes they are in direct conflict amongst themselves, as in the *Eumenides*. Furthermore, although there is no such clear-cut theory about the underworld, or the

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<sup>264</sup> Hall and Macintosh (2005), 330, 317 ff.

<sup>265</sup> Hall (2013) 166.

<sup>266</sup> Hall (2013) 161-166.

afterlife, analogous to the Christian heaven-hell duality, life after death is generally described in Greek literature as a dark, sad place, a far cry from the Kingdom of Heaven to which all faithful Christians aspire. It is problematic for example to impose characteristics of Christian martyrs on figures such as Antigone or Iphigenia, who are essentially fighting for civic rights and political goals. Part of the problem is that, regardless of directorial decisions, in the Christian West a significant part of the audience has been raised with such narratives revolving around the lives of Christian saints and thus can easily and subconsciously impose them on their perception of tragic characters.

For all these reasons, it is hard to imagine a Greek play being transported to a Christian setting without making significant alterations to the text and its meaning. On the other hand, we have seen what a tempting parallel it can be for solving 'the problem of the chorus'. What this means more specifically is that a contemporary religious parallel can create more intimacy between the chorus and the audience, can make up for hidden, lost layers of interpretation pertaining to the original cultural context, can give meaning to the collective voice, and can do away with the awkwardness surrounding the lyrical parts. So, in that sense, it is worth exploring by the contemporary director.

Today expressions of Christian faith are not limited to churches. They may be connected to a variety of social issues and perhaps there are cases when the chorus as a congregation or as religious followers would be a fruitful direction to take in the right context. Each nationality, each country, and each denomination has their distinguishing characteristics, touching on social, historical and cultural issues, that have strong dramatic potential. A theatrically successful and relatively recent example of religious *retopicalisation* with a sociopolitical undertone was *Iphigenia in T...* by Polish company Gardzienice<sup>267</sup>, an adaption of *Iphigenia in Tauris* that identified Iphigenia with the Polish cult of the Black Madonna of Częstochowa, and used the rituals of this cult. The director, Włodzimierz Staniewski, finds in the play a conflict between two opposing worlds:

[...] 'the Primitive' and 'the Civilized' [...] 'the God-fearing' and 'the Enlightened,' 'the Commoners' and 'the Aristocracy', 'those of the third speed' and 'those of the first'.<sup>268</sup>

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<sup>267</sup> Author of the performance: Włodzimierz Staniewski – based on *Iphigenia in Tauris* by Euripides  
Translation: Jerzy Łanowski, Costumes: Monika Onoszko, Animations: Krzysztof Dziwny, Marta Pajek,  
Karol Grabiec, Decorations: Ewa Woźniak. First performed in 2010 in the Polski Theatre in Warsaw.

<sup>268</sup> Staniewski (2011).

Perhaps it would be useful to consider a possible direction, as an example, connecting the ritual and the political, and Christianity with tragedy: the instances where religious practice is connected to the social issue of gender. This is an issue frequently addressed in scholarship and it may be a very fruitful area to explore theatrically, especially in relation to the female chorus. I would like here to offer some parallels between the tension dramatized in tragedy between women as agents of ritual and the male authority and attitudes still prevalent in Christian dogma today in some areas of the world.

Margaret Alexiou<sup>269</sup>, Helene Foley<sup>270</sup> and Casey Dué<sup>271</sup> have written about patriarchal society's fear of 'subversive' female lament. The implied attitude today behind the suppression of female ritual expressions or actions, is always that it is uncivilized, primitive, unruly, inappropriate, whereas male authority wishes to impose order and the central authority of an institution on all important rites of passage in life. Thus the suppression of female lament still exists in the context of the Christian Orthodox church services, which are at once male-dominated and also, as Alexiou has shown, have an ancient web of connections, primarily through the Virgin Mary, to female-dominated cult, such as the mourning for the death of Adonis, and community funeral rites. This is an interesting tension that can be used in our exploration of staging the chorus—and it is an issue of male and female spheres of authority, frequently explored in tragedy.

The ingrained idea that 'women must be silent in church' <sup>272</sup>, is a part of the Christian doctrine analogous to the tensions of 5th century BC caused from the suppression of public female manifestations of mourning discussed in Chapter 3.<sup>273</sup> We have some well-known examples of this tension in tragedy: In *Antigone* we see the clash between a female relative's rights and the central male authority's rules over religious acts in the city; in *Seven Against Thebes* the male ruler Eteocles tells the female chorus to stop their public supplication, that is inappropriate and a bad omen. Witnessing the suppression of spontaneous solo female lamentation during funerals in the Orthodox church today, by the clergy but also by society as whole, represented by the rest of the congregation, made me think of these two plays. It is mostly deemed 'inappropriate', primitive and un-Christian to give yourself over to grief in this way. It is also not the job

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<sup>269</sup> Alexiou, Yiatromanolakis and Roilos (2002).

<sup>270</sup> Foley (1993).

<sup>271</sup> Dué (2006).

<sup>272</sup> The Bible, English Standard Version: Corinthians 14:34 'the women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says.'

<sup>273</sup> See Foley (2009) for a thorough study of how tragedy reflects tensions in womens' social and religious roles.



of a woman any more to perform this rite of transition for the dead, at least publicly. She is by contrast allowed, and in fact duty-bound, to privately and quietly tend to the grave at frequent intervals. There is one occasion on which women in the Greek speaking world, traditionally sing as a chorus in an organized way, and it is the lament for Christ on Good Friday, the Epitaphios Threnos.<sup>274</sup> But this is even more interesting because even then, there is a palpable tension between the professional male lead chanters (*psaltai*), who have the microphone, and the amateur chorus of women that comes together for this one occasion, and in most cases doesn't read Byzantine music notation, since it may even be a spontaneous chorus from among the congregation. They know the tune by heart, from years of listening to it. But the lead *psaltes* may, on occasion, sing the hymns using a different, rarer *echos*, or melody type, to make the synchronized chanting more challenging. In this way he can assert his authority, since the job of lead *psaltes* carries great prestige.<sup>275</sup> The value of having such an amateur female chorus (that encourages of

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<sup>274</sup> These observations come from first-hand personal experience of Greek Orthodox church practice and its cultural context. Even today women sing in female monasteries in Greece in every service. Also, in Slavic Orthodox countries there is still a strong tradition of women singing in parochial churches. Specific cultural reasons, dating from the Byzantine era, seem to be behind the gradual reduction, almost eradication, of women's singing in the Greek Orthodox parochial church. The bibliography on the subject comes from two main areas of research and debate: the issue of women's ordination in the Orthodox Church (see for example Yiangou 2012, Vassiliadis, P., Papageorgiou, N. and Kasselouri-Hatzivassiliadi, E., 2017, Nikolaou 2015, Regule 2014) and the study of the technique and history of Byzantine Music. Paris (2016) is a very relevant source for the issue raised here, since it includes, apart from notes on technique, cultural and historical context for the evolution of church chanting as well as a chapter on women. Theodore Yiagou (2012), through a historical overview of the issue and an examination of various theological sources, reveals contrasting views put forth over the centuries on the subject of female singing in church and expresses a need for reform, reflecting contemporary society but also ancient practice. According to him there are no specific rules in the canons of the Ecumenical Councils preventing women from singing in church. (Yiagou, p. 21. See also Yiagou, 2017, pp. 179-198). There is evidence that in the ancient church and in the early years of the Byzantine empire men and women sang in church, both in mixed choruses and in separate male and female choruses singing in the antiphonic way, at least until the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Some holy fathers stress the beneficial effect of singing hymns on the members of the congregation, both male and female (Yiagou p. 6). Especially women could be prevented from chattering and gossiping if they sang in church *συνετώς* (prudently) (Yiagou p.7). At the same time, there are warnings in the writings of the holy fathers at various points in history that women's singing could lead to sin (Yiagou p.7). Women's lack of education during the Byzantine empire may have been another reason for their limited role in church (see also Nikolaou, 2005, pp. 206-210). Furthermore, other sources stress that female choruses singing in church are historically connected to heresy and thus carry the stigma of being subversive. (see Voulgaraki-Pisina, 2017 and Paris, pp. 93-94). Historically, the abandonment of the practice of having female deacons after the second period of Iconoclasm (9<sup>th</sup> century), due to the rise of notions of impurity of the female body, coincides with the start of a more general and systematic curtailment of women's role in worship, including singing (see Yiagou 18-19). On cultural notions of the impurity of women influencing church practice see also Regule (2014). The recent volume on the thorny issue of the ordination of women in the Orthodox Church, edited by P. Vassiliadis, N. Papageorgiou, N. and E. Kasselouri-Hatzivassiliadi (2018, Cambridge Scholars Publishing) also deals with the impact of cultural context and advocates the need for reform.

<sup>275</sup> If we take as evidence the views expressed in the current handbook for the course 'History and Aesthetics of Byzantine Music' used by the Department of Music and Art at the University of Macedonia, but also in the The Byzantine Music School of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Cyprus (Paris, 2016),

course the participation of the entire congregation), is lost on many members of the congregation too, who value technique more than spontaneous emotion. Here gender issues are interconnected with wider social issues, as these phenomena may also be seen as expressions of a conflict between urban sensibility and traditional village culture, where ancient customs tend to stay alive for longer.

This is perhaps a very obscure and personal example, but it is highly suggestive: my point is that if we observe closely, the frequently controversial issue of expression of faith, and the hierarchy within organized religion, can provide inspiration for contemporary productions of tragedy, and for the integration of the chorus.

In the following section I would like to discuss in detail one particular production as an example of the use of ritual in the contemporary staging of Greek tragedy. This production touches on several of the issues discussed in the first part of this chapter, such as experimentation through the use of contemporary ritual, the inspiration from existing traditional cultures, the politically charged use of commonly shared rituals, the seamless integration of singing and movement in the aesthetic of the production, primarily through the chorus and finally, the spiritual participation of the audience, a *methexis*, achieved

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we may conclude that the traditional view of the inferiority of women is still a big part of the cultural context of church practice. This source is less academically proficient than the sources mentioned above, but more revealing of common cultural notions and attitudes. In a short chapter by the editor, Nektarios Paris, explaining the absence of women chanters in the Greek Orthodox church, technical and aesthetic considerations mask deep-seated discrimination: women can't learn the complicated technique of Byzantine chanting (Paris 97, 98), while women's voices and men's voices clash because women's voices are high pitched so it is not possible to have 'serious chanting' if they sing together in mixed choruses (98). Paris even claims genetic characteristics of Greek women's voices, as opposed to women of other nationalities, that make them unsuitable for singing in church (98, 99). In his opinion polyphonic choirs which included women in the 20<sup>th</sup> century appeared during times of 'complete degradation of the prestige of church chanting' (98-99). Paris also laments the deteriorating alterations that developed with time in certain hymns to the Virgin Mary traditionally sang by women (99) and other hymns sang by mixed choirs (100). According to him the female voice is monotone and could be boring to the congregation (100). Aside from aesthetic considerations, Paris seeks to justify the Greek church's traditional position on the singing of women by quoting several holy fathers, such as St Jerome (4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> century), Gregory of Nanzianzus (4<sup>th</sup> century) and Cyril of Jerusalem (4<sup>th</sup> century), who warn that enjoying female chanting in church may lead men to temptation and sin, that women's chanting contains an arrogance that is incompatible with Christian beliefs about the position of women, that there is a sensual quality to the singing of women that is incompatible to the Christian worship and that women should rather 'sing with their hearts rather with their lips'. (See Paris pp. 95-96.) Paris in general concludes that we should adopt the advice of some holy fathers that women should sing 'silently' during the service, just by moving their lips (102). This handbook then gives us a glimpse of the deep conservatism and elitist attitude among church chanters, which makes any 'democratizing' tendency in church music, such as the inclusion of lay or female choruses, unacceptable and lamentable. Nonetheless, the Byzantine Female Chanters Association of Greece, founded in 2013, advocates and promotes female chanting in church. Their facebook page shows evidence that this is a quickly evolving field.

through the characterization of the chorus, the fruitful exploration of contemporary Christian ritual and, above all, the historical-political moment.

### **3. Case Study: Euripides' *Suppliants*, by the Cyprus Theatre Organization: the momentum of a historical parallel.<sup>276</sup>**

Euripides' *Suppliants*, produced by THOC (the Cyprus Theatre Organization, the State Theatre of Cyprus) in Cyprus in 1978, translated by Kostis Kolotas, directed by Nikos Charalambous, with set and costume design by Yiorgos Ziakas, and music by Michalis Christodoulidis, was presented in Greece in 1979, taking part in the Athens Festival, at Lycabettus theatre, and at Epidaurus in 1980, marking a new era for the participation of the State Theatre of Cyprus in the Epidaurus festival.

The theatre theorist Antri H. Constantinou writes about this production of *Suppliants*:

Euripides' *The Suppliant Women*, performed in 1978, was a landmark in the history of THOC [...] The success of *The Suppliant Women*, coupled with the acknowledgment of THOC as one of most notable theatrical organizations in the Greek-speaking world, led to the Organisation's participation in 1980 in the Festival of Ancient Theatre at Epidaurus, Greece. The Greek audience was to experience a Cypriot production on the evils of war, only six years after the events of 1974. The play generated a great deal of emotional reaction. Here the concept of the director linked the play to Cyprus history and folklore.<sup>277</sup>

This production achieved innovation, in its historical and aesthetic context, especially with regard to the chorus, by drawing from local folk and Christian Orthodox tradition. I would like to focus my analysis of this production on the effective use of ritual, powered by the historical moment and the specific cultural context, shared and recognized among Greeks and Cypriots. This marriage between *laiki paradosi* (folk tradition) and a ritual staging, was an innovation at the time and a key to the success of the production. Costas Georgousopoulos, in his review of the production when it toured in Greece in 1979, identifies the elements that manage to achieve this dual effect, i.e. that it uses ritual and

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<sup>276</sup> A recording of the performance in Athens Lycabettus theatre can be found here:

<http://youtu.be/lje3sSszS7c>

<sup>277</sup> Constantinou (2011b).

is rooted in folk tradition at the same time, in the use of masks, the symbolism of costumes, the movement and speech.<sup>278</sup> He is among many critics who saw this production as opening new directions in the staging of Greek drama at the time, by creating dynamic parallels between the past and the present.

### **i. The aesthetic context**

This production acquired a legendary status, because of its enthusiastic reception in Greece, which opened the door of Epidaurus to Cypriot theatre, its successful international tours, but also because of its artistic ‘dream team’ that went on to dominate Cypriot theatre for decades.<sup>279</sup>

On the other hand, reviews of the time when it was first performed in Cyprus show to what extent this iconoclastic approach to Greek drama broke with the norms, causing mostly hostile reactions, revolving mostly around the all-time favourite of conservative critics, the question of what is ‘appropriate’ for Greek drama.<sup>280</sup>

The reviews are easier to understand if we take into consideration the history of contemporary performance of Greek drama in Cyprus up to that point. Before *The Suppliants* there were very few professional productions of Greek drama in Cyprus, and those were mainly of comedies or satyr plays. These professional attempts started in the 60s, by smaller independent companies, before the foundation of the state theatre, and were productions of plays by Aristophanes, with the exception of the 1973 *Cyclops* directed by Nicos Charalambous. Later on the new state theatre, the Cyprus Theatre Organization, founded in 1971, produced two tragedies, *Agamemnon* (1971) and *Ajax* (1973), both directed by Greeks, Nikos Hatziskos and S. Karantinos respectively, and both with an ‘academic approach’, placing great emphasis on the poetic text.<sup>281</sup> This strict, theatrically minimalist and logocentric approach had been the norm for years in the Greek-speaking world, since the first productions in the 20th century by the Greek National Theatre, and is an important part of the context of the critical reception of the

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<sup>278</sup> Georgousopoulos (1979). Georgousopoulos also mentions this quality in Charalambous work, which he calls ‘laiki litotita’, the use of traditional folk elements within a framework of simplicity in design and aesthetic, in Georgousopoulos and Gogos (2002) 121.

<sup>279</sup> Reference to the importance of the play on Cyprus Theatre Organization website: <https://www.thoc.org.cy/about/istoriki-anadromi,el-about-01-02-01,el>

<sup>280</sup> For a more extensive discussion of the taboo status of tragedy in Greece and Cyprus and notions of what ‘should’ and ‘shouldn’t’ be done in contemporary productions see Chapter 6 pp.206-7, 212-13, and *passim*.

<sup>281</sup> See Constantinou (2005) 241-243 for an overview of theatrical productions of Greek drama in Cyprus in the years before Charalambous’ *Suppliants*.

‘experimental’ *Suppliants*. The fact that Charalambous was the first Cypriot director to direct tragedy is also an indication of the taboos surrounding the genre:<sup>282</sup> up until that moment only directors from Greece, perceived to have more experience in tragedy and inherently a better understanding of how it should be done had directed tragedy in Cyprus.<sup>283</sup>

It is worth remembering that a defining parameter of the reception context is the notion, common in both Greece and Cyprus, of the ‘holiness’ or somehow ‘sacred’ status of this material, which entails a resistance to experimentation or challenge to tradition.<sup>284</sup> Even though— or, perhaps, precisely because— in Cyprus the tradition of staging Greek tragedy is shorter than in mainland Greece, as Constantinou points out, innovative tendencies appeared from the beginning, with Charalambous’ *Suppliants* sparking this tradition of experimentation, which became for years a distinct characteristic of Cypriot directors participating in the Epidaurus festival.<sup>285</sup> Eventually the production became a source of pride for the Cypriot theatre community, and received many revivals. Today Charalambous’ spectacular approach to Greek drama, with the overload of symbolism and the tendency towards a representation of metaphysical elements, is considered almost the ‘traditional’ way to do Greek tragedy in Cyprus, and certainly rather dated.

But in 1978 the critics’ reactions were generally marked by a sense of outrage at the *mise-en-scène*, which they saw as undermining the text in favor of directorial excesses. Aside from the sense of violation of a ‘holy’ text, another prevailing notion of the time was that the strict hierarchy of the Aristotelean elements of drama should be maintained: Cypriot critics are basically saying that spectacle, or any other element, should never come before the text itself, i.e. the original plot, and what they see as its

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<sup>282</sup> For the ideological ‘baggage’ of Attic drama revivals in contemporary Greece and Cyprus, in particular the connection to issues of national identity and a sense of ownership of the material, see chapter 6 of this thesis.

<sup>283</sup> Cyprus, a British colony since 1878, became an independent state in 1960. Professional productions of Greek tragedy do not have a long history in Cyprus, while by contrast there is a tradition of amateur, mostly school performances of Greek drama since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, often performed in ancient Greek. In 1961 the first Aristophanes comedy by a professional company was produced. It was *Ploutos* directed by Evis Gavrielides. The first professional production of tragedy directed by a Cypriot was the *Suppliants* in 1978. For the history of Attic drama on the Cypriot stage and the contribution of Gavrielides and Charalambous in its establishment as a standard part of the repertoire see Constantinou (2011a). For the history of Cypriot theatre since the independence see Constantinou 2005 and 2014.

<sup>284</sup> Constantinou (2005) 124-125.

<sup>285</sup> Constantinou (2005) 245.

original meaning. This includes never tampering with the original ‘stage directions’, having a too interesting set or music score, etc.<sup>286</sup>

The inability or refusal to acknowledge the political and ritual reading in Charalambous’ *mise-en-scène* is the (to me) most striking of the critics’ objections. Allusions to the recent history of Cyprus, which, as we shall see below, in the international and Greek tours were one of the main ingredients for the success of the production, were dismissed by most Cypriot critics as an unnecessary intervention to the original, with the notable exception of Christos Zanos, who accepts this as a valid directorial intention but at the same time finds it unsuccessful in its execution.<sup>287</sup> Any movement away from the traditional norm for staging Greek tragedy is (to such critics) incomprehensible. I shall argue that both the parallels with Cypriot history and the anti-war message behind the ironic, subversive reading of the characters of Theseus and Athena were essential to the meaning of this production and the interpretation of its stage metaphors, its use of the design and music as well as its treatment of the spoken word. Thus a new ‘meaning’, a meta-narrative that overrides the original story, provides the interpretative basis of every choice in spectacle, lyrics parts and text.

In 1979, when the production took part in the Athens festival, the Greek critics’ reactions were quite different. In general, there was great appreciation of this experimental approach to the genre, and special emphasis was given to the emotional resonance of the historical context. The reviews speak of an extremely warm audience reception, especially in relation to the vivid parallels with recent contemporary history.<sup>288</sup>

Most notably, theatre critic Eleni Varopoulou praised the innovative directorial approach, as an effort to restore a living communication between the ancient text and the contemporary Greek audience.<sup>289</sup> Costas Georgousopoulos was even more enthusiastic, characterizing Charalambous’ *mise-en-scène* ‘the only solution to staging Greek tragedy today’, meaning the creation of a strong contemporary historical/political parallel. ‘Myth becomes a symbol through which history is not explained, but verified.’<sup>290</sup> The critic Thymele praised the bold and innovative directorial choices, and appreciated the fact that

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<sup>286</sup> See for example Chrysanthis (1978) p. 268, where he complains that the music was too loud and overpowering, the set was too overpowering, and the language was demoted because of the parallel use of Ancient and Modern Greek.

<sup>287</sup> Zanos (1978).

<sup>288</sup> On the warm audience reactions there are several mentions in the press, for example Lianis (1979) and Koltsidopoulou (1979).

<sup>289</sup> Varopoulou (1979).

<sup>290</sup> Georgousopoulos (1979).

the established codes of performance of Greek drama were subverted through the use of expressionism, symbolism, realism and simplicity in the acting, as well as through the use of ritual and folk tradition.<sup>291</sup>

## ii. The historical context

Perhaps the most important factor that contributed to the realization and success of the production is the historical and political context, mentioned by Constantinou above. In this context the ritual acts of supplication and the burial of the dead have very strong parallels in the audience's reality. This context was the emotionally charged atmosphere in Cyprus soon after the war of 1974, with the collective trauma of the refugees and the missing vividly present in everyone's consciousness. Like in many of the productions mentioned in this chapter, especially in a post-colonial context, the Cypriot *Suppliants* achieved the convergence of the ritual/religious atmosphere and the production's political goal. The 1974 was very recent and the human tragedy it caused was still very much an open wound in 1979-80: a great number of refugees were displaced and living in temporary camps, and thousands of soldiers and civilians were missing, from both sides of the conflict. The humanitarian tragedy of the missing in particular was the direct historical connection to the subject matter of the *Suppliants*.<sup>292</sup> In the years, even decades, following the war, the female relatives of the Greek Cypriot missing, mothers, wives, daughters, dressed in black and clasping black and white photos of their relatives, would march to the line of separation in Nicosia, a city divided by the conflict, in protest, demanding an answer about the fate of their loved ones.<sup>293</sup> The imagery surrounding the missing is not dissimilar to the imagery surrounding the mothers of the disappeared during the Dirty War in Argentina. In fact, the artistic team of this production mentions the strong parallels between the Cypriot relatives of the missing and Argentinian demonstrations at Plaza de Mayo in the programme note. These women had by 1978 become iconic, their daily marches to the border a ritual, the photographs symbols of the entire war. Only very recently, in the last decade, has the discovery of the bodies begun, and their identification through DNA testing, after mass graves on either side of the border were revealed. But when the play was performed, the demonstrations for the

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<sup>291</sup> Thymele (1979).

<sup>292</sup> See also Hatzikosti (2013) 170.

<sup>293</sup> See <http://www.missing-cy.org.cy>

missing were at their peak.<sup>294</sup> In the methodology chapter of this thesis I laid out in more detail the importance attributed in recent scholarship to historical moment and how it can be a decisive factor for the meaning and force of a production.<sup>295</sup> This context is now considered as important in the analysis of a production as the text, the aesthetics, and any other elements of the *mise-en-scène*. The director of the *Suppliants*, Nicos Charalambous, wrote in a recent article:

I believe that the most important factor contributing to the valid claim of our *Suppliants* as a successful proposal for the revival of Greek drama, was the social and political atmosphere of the time and its significant impact on the psyche of everyone involved in this adventure of producing Euripides' play. [...] The performance worked aesthetically and politically, but it worked mostly because of its effect on our collective consciousness, as an enactment of tragic catharsis or even as 'return of the unjustly lost dead who demanded restitution and justice'.<sup>296</sup>  
(my translation)

We also have to bear in mind the living religious context of the production: a great percentage of the Greek and Cypriot population are church-goers, or are at least very familiar with some of the Greek Orthodox rites whose echoes were used in the staging. These rituals had an emotional resonance regardless of the viewer's personal religious faith. This familiarity, together with the recent experience of the war, created the environment in which audience participation/experience of the event made the ritual work as a tool of creating a community of everyone present and stirring the emotions. Aithra's totem-like figure during the chorus' supplication became in the collective imagination of the audience almost like a Panagia, a Byzantine image of the Virgin Mary.

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<sup>294</sup> Several Cypriot productions of Greek drama inspired by the 1974 events followed Charalambous' *Suppliants*. Over the next few years these productions put particular emphasis on the plight of refugees and on the loss of the homeland. See especially Hatzikosti (2011) for an examination of the ways in which Greek drama is read and presented in contemporary performance through the prism of the 1974 events in a series of contemporary Cypriot productions. As she points out, when the *Suppliants* were produced, the fate of the missing was an even more pressing matter than the return of the refugees. But as time went on, the focus changed. The issue of the missing resurfaced in the 2003 production of *Trojan Women*, directed by George Mouaimis and the 2005 *Antigone* directed by Stavros Tsakiris.

<sup>295</sup> See especially Hall and Harrop (2010), Mee and Foley (2011).

<sup>296</sup> Charalambous, (2005).





*Figure 1: The ERT archive. Jenny Gaitanopoulou as Aithra. Still from video recording of Euripides' Suppliants by the Cyprus Theatre Organisation, 1984 revival, Lycabettus Theatre, Athens. Available through: <http://www.projectohomere.com>*

### **iii. The production**

Instead of focusing on individual ritual acts performed in the play, in the following paragraphs I would like to offer an analysis of the entire performance as one continuous ritual: it is marked by visual clarity, it draws from local folk traditions but at the same time supports its concept with inventiveness and the use of symbolism. The treatment of the chorus is essential to this: the characters emerge out of the collective of the chorus, then return to it; on-stage characters and chorus are often intermingled; the choral odes spill into the action. The prominence of the collective of the ensemble, that is at times inseparable from the collective of the chorus, is the aspect of this production that I would like to emphasize in connection to the central argument of this thesis. As such, this production is an example of group ritual used towards theatrical innovation, and specifically towards making the ancient play contemporary, in terms of both political meaning and aesthetic. Charalambous in his program note states clearly this goal: 'Euripides is contemporary and that's how we approached the text.' This vision, shared

by the translator, Kostis Kolotas, lead to a script that was written ‘to be acted’, marked by immediacy and directness.<sup>297</sup>

#### **a. Set**

In general, the visual aesthetic of the production, created by Yiorgos Ziakas, is marked by simplicity and clarity in its use of symbols, with a colour palette of earth tones, reds, black and some yellow, and in the materials used that seem to come out of a ‘humble’ folk tradition of rural Cyprus. There is a wooden rectangular platform centre, which serves as the altar of the temple of Demeter. Upstage centre stands a tall red polygonal tower, made of vertical and horizontal pieces, with several openings and levels. This tower will in turn represent a temple in Eleusis; Thebes, with its seven gates, especially during the messenger speech when the chorus enact the battle narrated in this scene; a conceptual Athens, or the power of Athens, as Theseus stands on top of the tower to confront the Theban heralds, and rejects their claim; the funeral pyre of Kapaneas, with Evadne standing on the top, the structure allowing her to jump through its central funnel and disappear into the funeral pyre; and finally the divine plane, as it is where Athena appears at the end. Therefore, starting with the set design, the space is not used realistically, but symbolically, with a strong connection to the metaphysical plain, to memory, and as a threshold to another world. Also, the ensemble come out of this structure to address the audience at the beginning of the play, in Nicos Charalambous’ prologue. At this moment we can endow this set piece with several meanings: is it the battlefield of Thebes or Cyprus? Is it our collective historical or emotional memory? In the production the enactment of a ritual is aimed at awakening the memory of the audience and of the performers. This direction overrides any attempt at a realistic representation of action or of a series of events.

In 1978 this was a very controversial set for the Cypriot critics, because it did not respect the unity of place of the original: to an audience used to seeing some version of a palace or temple door dominating the set, this ‘war machine’ as the set designer describes it, that was able to change and evoke several locations and multiple layers of symbolism, was baffling and also, according to some, overpowering.<sup>298</sup> The designer describes it in

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<sup>297</sup> Charalambous (1978). All excerpts from the production’s programme are translated by the author of this thesis.

<sup>298</sup> A typical reaction to the design, is that of Chrysanthis, who characterizes the set design as

the programme note as ‘a war game, where powerful men play at war. It invades the orchestra in a threatening way. At the beginning it tries to look like a temple. Then it opens and becomes a steel bird, red and black, a war machine and at the same time a set piece that serves the performance functionally.’

### **b. Costumes**

Again Yiorgos Ziakas' programme note is very useful here: he explains that the inspiration for the costumes came from a 6th century BC votive clay statuette wearing a knitted costume, which he saw at the Cyprus Archaeological museum. Coupled with the Cypriot traditional knits from unprocessed wool, this was the inspiration for the basic costume for every member of the company, with elements added on during the play to distinguish the main characters. A detail that added to the impact of this performance was that the woven costumes of the chorus were made by Cypriot women in a refugee camp.

In the costumes and props the influence from traditional Cypriot crafts, artifacts and patterns is most obvious, even in details such as the warrior's shields, which were inspired by traditional Cypriot baskets. This was something unusual, as these humble traditional crafts, evoking peasant life in the countryside, were not things normally considered appropriate for the high art of tragedy. But this was a play about a recent Cypriot tragedy. In the costumes of the royalty the symbolism continues, along with the anti-war reading of the play. Ziakas writes in the programme note:

The costumes of the royalty are golden, flashy and empty. They make a hollow tin sound. Arrogance and vanity. All made out of netting and tin cans [...] Athena is a scarecrow: A warrior *ex machina*—a messenger made of tin cans, chicken wire and tangled wool padding, wrapped in thin white headscarves flowing in the wind.<sup>299</sup> (my translation)

### **e. The music**

The composer Michalis Christodoulidis in his programme note emphasizes the importance of lament, as a universal expression of grief. In his opinion lament is a

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‘unacceptable’ and ‘in bad taste’, mostly because the war tower upstage is ‘too distracting’ and ignores the stage direction that the setting is supposed to be the temple of Demeter. (1978) 268.

<sup>299</sup> Ziakas (1978).

traditional ritual that is recognizable and emotionally resonant in any country and in any era. Thus many of the choral odes were structured like laments, evoking several traditional cultures, such as Cypriot folk music, Byzantine church chanting, traditional music from Northern Greece as well as African music.

A notable characteristic of the soundscape, which later on became almost a trademark for Charlambous' productions, was the use of Ancient Greek together with or instead of Modern Greek in the choral odes. The ancient language was used as part of the score, for its musicality and its mystical quality. The actual meaning of the words was of secondary importance.

The music was crucial to the character and structure of the performance, and as such it is mentioned frequently in the reviews. Again, in 1978 the Cypriot critics seemed to be quite shocked by it, found it overpowering, too loud, and too confusing.<sup>300</sup>

Perhaps part of what displeased the Cypriot critics was in fact the unapologetic way in which lamentation and grief was expressed through recognizable folk elements. The composer in the programme note states clearly that he is more interested 'in the human characteristics of these mythical characters [...] interested in pain, in lamentation'. He is interested in moving the spectator through emphasis on the human and humble dimension of this drama.<sup>301</sup> This of course clashed directly with the heroic aesthetic of the time that the critics are defending, in which expressions of grief are stylized, and contained through the strict choreography and music score, and very different from the contemporary expressions of grief among the 'common folk'. It is worth noting here that there is no 'choreography' as such in this production, but a work on group movement, based on improvisation.

#### **iv. Description of the performance.**

This production begins with the chorus, or rather, the whole ensemble as a chorus. This was a directorial innovation, a prologue before the prologue, essentially a group ritual whose purpose was to enter, physically and spiritually, the world of the play.

The ensemble come out of the 'seven gates' of the tall stage building up stage centre, forming a line downstage facing the audience, and speaking all together, but not in unison, addressing the audience directly, with the lines:

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<sup>300</sup> See for example Chrysanthi (1978) 268.

<sup>301</sup> Christodoulidis, 1978.

Σήμερα ήρθαμε εδώ να ζητήσουμε τους νεκρούς που μας αρνήθηκαν οι εχθροί για να τους θάψουμε...

Today we have come here to demand our dead, which the enemy has denied us, to bury them.

This was of course a contemporary addition to the text. The language was direct and simple demotic Greek, without any musical accompaniment, delivered as if a ‘crowd’ was speaking, rather than a chorus. The company at this point all wore half masks and pale cream caps on their heads that covered their hair, and pale cream or earth-tone costumes. Their demand built to a crescendo over a few minutes. The most immediately striking fact about them was that they appeared to be a cross section of the population: men, women, young and old, and several small children. This contributed to the effect that we were watching the crowd in a kind of a demonstration. As soon as the first ritual act began, they became a congregation. They were of course far from a realistic representation of a crowd: there was a strangeness in their presence, a ghostly quality enhanced by the pale cream costumes and the half mask. Nonetheless, they looked distinctly Cypriot, without referencing a specific era or demographic. This was due to the colours and fabrics of the costumes, that look like traditional loom woven fabrics, and the ceremonial leafy branches they held in their hands. The director, in an interview quoted in an article in the Greek newspaper *Ta Nea* describes the process by which the prologue came about based on the actors’ personal experience of the 1974 war:

We created a work group, which you don’t normally see in National theatres, and from the darkness of the first rehearsal we arrived at the fateful phrase ‘we have come here to demand our dead, which the enemy has denied us, to bury them’.<sup>302</sup> (my translation)

Soon, to the sound of a gong, we entered a ritual that lasted throughout the play. In Euripides’ *Suppliants* the chorus are already on stage when the play begins, in supplication around Aithra, at the altar of Demeter and Persephone at Eleusis. So instead

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<sup>302</sup> Lianis (1979).

of an entrance song, here part of the chorus' song addressed to Aithra after the prologue was set to music, as the ensemble 'entered' the world of the play, through a group ritual, characterized by constant movement, singing and chanting. The chant had a Byzantine quality, strongly reminiscent of the orthodox service. The text was the first line of the first chorus in the original text, sung in ancient Greek: 'ἵκετεύω σε, γεραία, γεραιῶν ἐκ στομάτων, πρὸς γόνυ πίπτουσα τὸ σόν', while the structure of the rest of the song was antiphonal, with byzantine chanting. Branches and other offerings were carried to the central altar, which enhanced the religious tone of this *parodos*, since it reminded the audience of Palm Sunday, the Epitaphios procession on Good Friday,<sup>303</sup> or any other religious ritual of any culture that includes offerings to God or to the gods. Throughout this first song the ensemble was in constant, improvisational, organic motion, the effect of a contemporary congregation becoming stronger in the course of the *parodos*. A group rhythm was created, another powerful component of ritual, during the performance of some basic ritual acts: placing their offerings on the altar, kneeling, then moving on, in a constant and organic flow. This was again a departure from the 'traditional' staging that prevailed up until that point, as it avoided strict intricate choreography and stylization.<sup>304</sup> During the first part of this song none of the main characters had yet separated themselves from the group, the ensemble as a chorus dominating the *mise-en-scène* from the beginning, a collective with a common goal and common ritual language. The characters would 'become' the characters, during the performance with the help of the ensemble, since the taking on of a dramatic identity was most often accompanied by a ritual performed by the whole group. The first such ritual was the ceremonial dressing of the actress playing Aithra (Jenny Gaitanopoulou) by the chorus: it included a ceremonial dressing with an intricate costume piece by piece, to the sound of chanting, it took place on the central platform which had been endowed with a sacred quality during the first song, and it ended with the person at the centre of the ritual being transformed. The result was indeed striking, with the transformational costume playing a big role here. It was red and white, making the actress look considerably taller and wider. Furthermore, the symmetry of costume, pedestal and supplication branches in either hand, made Aithra

<sup>303</sup> In the *Epitaphios* procession on Good Friday in the Orthodox tradition, a sacred piece of fabric with the embroidered body of Christ on it is carried in the streets, on a bier covered by a dome-like structure and lavishly decorated with flowers, to the accompaniment of hymns or even a military band. The priests and chanters lead the procession and the congregation follows.

<sup>304</sup> Christos Zanos in his review finds this treatment of the chorus refreshing, as it breaks the old mould of synchronized movement and strict choreography and does away with the traditional 'cold staging' of tragedy. (Zanos, 1978.)

look like a divine figure, especially as the mothers of the dead now knelt in front of her in supplication, in clusters or scattered around the altar.

Jenny Gaitanopoulou (Aithra) speaks vividly about this moment:

It is a ritual scene. One minute you are one of the crowd, and then gradually you get into a state, you become something else, you become a totem, through ritual, you become a god, you become a king [...] This dressing scene, was such an important part of the ritual and of the actor's performance. You start off almost like a normal person, and every time they put [a piece of the costume] on you, you enter deeper into a different state. It is gradual [...] Don't priests do the same during the liturgy? They wear a special costume, in order to be able to perform a ritual.<sup>305</sup>

During this time the ensemble member playing Adrastus also 'became the character: his costume change involved an extremely long white piece of fabric, like a winding sheet, covering his head and shoulders, and covering a large area in front of him on stage, finally connecting him to Aithra on the altar.' Gaitanopoulou refers to these sheets, used throughout the production, as 'umbilical chords'.<sup>306</sup> The youngest members of the chorus of Suppliants gathered around Adrastus.

The next choral song was also taken from the ode in lines 42-87. The director and composer split this ode in two, part of it performed during the directorial 'prologue' before Aithra's speech and the rest at this point.

This ode, which in the text is the moment of the actual supplication to Aithra, was not dramatized in a conventional way, the sense of ritual and atmosphere overriding any goal to clarify the meaning through the staging. As with the opening song, the chorus's behavior, mainly the use of sound and movement, had the effect of physically changing the person at the centre of the ritual. The music here was reminiscent of the folk music of Northern Greece, with a fast tempo, shrill female voices and some male voices to add depth, and was interspersed with lines in ancient Greek spoken by Aithra, from her first monologue. The use of ancient Greek added to the strangeness and mystical quality of the scene, while the movement of the chorus was vigorous and trance-like. They held up long and wide black cloaks, moving them fast, as they surrounded the queen, so that she was gradually enveloped by them, disappearing from view and becoming silent. At the end of this stasimon she had had another costume change: she was not a totem or a

<sup>305</sup> From an interview with Jenny Gaitanopoulou with the author in 2013.

<sup>306</sup> Varopoulou in her review advises caution in the use of these sheets as they had become too common in contemporary staging of Greek drama and other genres internationally. (Varopoulou, 1979.)

religious statue anymore, but a more human character, a queen and a mother. Thus the effect of the supplication on the character of Aithra was turned into a theatrical metaphor. The ode-scene was abruptly interrupted by Theseus' entrance and his sudden scream at the beginning of his monologue, like a spell being broken.

The next episode included speeches and stichomythia with Theseus (Stelios Kafkarides) and Adrastus (Eftichios Poullaides). The winding sheet connected the two men with Aithra in a triangle, but was also used to visually express the dynamic of the scene. It added tension, becoming the physical expression of the pressure of Theseus' interrogation of Adrastus. It also connected Adrastus to the altar, thus becoming a visual symbol of his sacred status as a suppliant. The visual theme of the sheets, introduced here, continued to be explored throughout the performance and, although semantically ambiguous at times, it enhanced the connectedness among ensemble members and the seamless transition between individual scenes and odes. As objects, these sheets, in addition to their symbolic use, gradually acquired ritual significance.

The next stasimon (Il. 263-285), which the chorus refer to in line 281 as 'οἰκτρὸν ἰήλεμον' (pitiful lament), became a very memorable and atmospheric musical piece. It was introduced by a flute solo under the final lines of the previous episode, and in dynamic and quality contrasted with the previous frantic scene and stasimon. The staging here was closer to an actual supplication by the chorus. The ode included a beautiful solo from the chorus leader (Despina Bebedeli) and anti-phonic responses by the chorus, with much repetition that was reminiscent of traditional lament. It was interspersed with lines from the conversation between Theseus and Aithra. Aithra's behaviour, movement and costume at the centre of the stage picture, the receiver of the ritual actions, was a focal point here: on the altar with Theseus in her arms, she becomes once again a Madonna.

The issue of traditional lament being used in a dynamic, relevant way in contemporary performance arises here. In this production it worked for a variety of reasons. Mostly, for its effective emotional resonance with the audience, as it included familiar melodic patterns, a beautiful execution, and the sense of sacredness and shared ritual established early on. The chorus, with the odes spilling into the scenes, continued throughout to have a very prominent presence at the centre of the action, whether vocally or visually. The sense of ensemble remained very strong, as the chorus changed into characters who retreated to the group again. In terms of staging, the images of supplication, with the offerings, the sheets and long cloaks, and the organic continuous movement, were essential to the stage picture and the atmosphere of the epeisodia.



The third ode was sung entirely in ancient Greek, as time passed and the Suppliants waited for the Messenger to come. This was the only instance in which the chorus' goal appeared to be to cover a temporal transition.

The Messenger, (Spyros Stavriniadis), entered inconspicuously during the choral ode, an exhausted and wounded survivor of a battle, his voice hoarse and broken, wearing bloody bandages and a simple 20th century military helmet. As soon as he started to speak the chorus leader wrapped him with the edge of the white sheet that Adrastus was wearing, binding him thus to the Argive king and to the central platform/altar. Thus he became part of whatever was the symbolic action around the central playing area.

The Messenger speech was one of the most controversial moments in the production and, in my opinion, one of the most memorable. Although in the original the Messenger actually brings good news, in this production his demeanour, his voice, his haunting appearance, all contributed to the anti-war message of the play, which, once more, as meta-narrative, overpowered the original text. The wounded messenger, in contrast to the ensemble, moved very little, but used whatever strength he had left to conjure up the horror of battle. The parallel with recent historical events in Cyprus here reached its peak, even though not a single word of the original text was changed. For critics, the most controversial element of the staging here was that during his speech chorus members re-enacted the events, creating movement pieces and tableaux representing battle scenes, inside the tower dominating the upstage area. At the same time the chorus sang, repeating the Messenger's lines, the whole effect strongly evocative of a Greek folk song (*demotiko tragoudi*) in the oral poetry tradition of Modern Greece and Cyprus. The iambic meter of the translation here, as well as the music, contributed to this effect.

Normally this choreographic choice for the chorus, i.e. echoing the Messenger speech through movement or tableaux, can be risky, aesthetically as well as semantically. It can create confusion as to the identity and role of the chorus, it can divide focus in a non-constructive way, and it can lead to awkward moments of 'mime'. However, in the world of this production, in which the chorus members were the ensemble of the entire cast, but above all they retained a strong identity as the people of Cyprus re-telling a story, this directorial choice did work. Furthermore, the aesthetic of *demotiko tragoudi*, i.e. folk oral poetry, evoked the sensibility of rhapsodic folk narration, and awakened collective cultural memory. The figures of the chorus in the background in the tableaux vivants were ghostly, like images from the past. Georgousopoulos in his review appreciated this

directorial choice and went one step further, claiming that this messenger speech had now become part of the canon of folk oral poetry.<sup>307</sup>

For the burial of the Argive leaders a more ‘realistic’ ritual was enacted, through music, costumes and props, such as live flames in wax effigies, reminiscent of Greek orthodox *tamata*, anthropomorphic offerings made of wax, often placed on saints’ icons. As the bodies were carried off stage for burial the choral ode was again sung entirely in ancient Greek, its melody revealing a glimmer of hope, as balance was restored through burial. This of course served to enhance, through contrast, the horrific events of the next scene, in which Evadne, the wife of Kapaneas, would throw herself on her husband’s funeral pyre, before the eyes of her father. Evadne’s scene raised again the issue of the strong ‘Cypriot’ character of the production. Evadne (Maria Micha) appeared suddenly, interrupting the harmony of the funeral procession, dressed in celebratory red robes, on top of the tower up stage centre. At the bottom of the tower was the fire of her husband’s pyre. The costume’s colour and volume, in great contrast to the black cloaks of the mourners below, made her look all aflame already. Soon her father Iphis appeared, connected to the collective through his simple beige costume, and wearing a black cloak over his head, like the mourners. Their stichomythia was extremely fast, with lines overlapping, and the exact textual meaning once taking a secondary role. Instead the effect was to accelerate the action to the inevitable moment when Evadne fell from above into the pyre. Iphis’ monologue after Evadne’s suicide was one of the most moving moments of this production, perhaps due to its simplicity. There was no intricate lament, no musical accompaniment, and no antiphonal singing from the chorus. Instead Iphis’ comments on the futility of human life, were delivered in a realistic acting style, with the simplicity of overwhelming, exhausting pain. Furthermore, his voice retained strong traces of the Cypriot accent, while the traditional grand tragic style of delivery was avoided, in favour of a disarming directness. While there was no musical accompaniment, his speech gradually became a traditional lament, as he began to sing the ends of the lines in the style of a Cypriot demotic song.

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<sup>307</sup> Georgousopoulos, (1979). For the use of folk elements, in a minimal but effective way, (‘λαϊκή λιτότητα’), see Georgousopoulos and Gogos, (2002) 121.

## v. Conclusion

If the whole play is a re-enactment of the recent ‘tragedy’ in Cypriot history by the ensemble, with emphasis on the missing dead, who remain unburied, the religious theme through the use of collectively shared rituals as a vehicle for story-telling becomes dramaturgically essential. Thus, even though this was not a ‘literal’ retopicalization that evoked a real-life setting, the rituals enacted evoked well-known rites in the contemporary world. Other elements of the *mise-en-scène*, invented, symbolic and formal, enhanced the ritual atmosphere in a different way. One of them was the use of the half-mask: the effect was not quite of estrangement, but of sacredness. It gave the characters and the chorus quality that transcended time and place, and also connected the human with the divine plane. Jenny Gaitanopoulou describes working with the mask:

You leave your identity behind, it takes away your personality as a normal everyday person and gives you the enlarged characteristics of the role you are playing. There is no personal commentary on the work by you an actor. It is gone, lost, you become one with the ensemble.<sup>308</sup>

Gaitanopoulou’s description, but also the effect of use of costumes and masks in the entire production, concurs with David Wiles’ theory about the sacred quality of ancient Greek masks. Wiles has argued that Greek masks have the metaphysical power of transforming the actor wearing them into the character which they are supposed to represent. His theory is founded on the view of Greek drama as primarily a religious experience, in which the mask played a key role as a means of effecting the presence of divine and heroic figures in the performance.<sup>309</sup> If Wiles’ interpretation is correct, then this production came close to reflecting some of the original’s religious and ritual dynamic.

Another crucial element is the use of rhythm: there was a constant interchange between fast and slow, but at the same time a sense that the whole performance was structured like a musical score. Everything was interconnected through imagery and sound, there were no gaps, no jarring changes of direction.<sup>310</sup>

The on-stage dressing of the characters, such as the transformation of Aithra from chorus member to religious totem, and the dressing of Theseus in his warrior costume,

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<sup>308</sup> From an interview with the author in 2013.

<sup>309</sup> Wiles (2007) pp. 237-238, 244-47, 258, 260, 266.

<sup>310</sup> On the production’s internal rhythm see also Christos Zanos (1978).

was a simple but effective ritual, especially with the musical accompaniment and the participation of the ensemble.

Of course the soundscape, the almost continuous score inspired by byzantine music and folk music of Greece, Cyprus and Africa, used to connect the odes with the epeisodia, enhanced the structure of the production as an ensemble ritual. The use of ancient Greek as part of the score, on the one hand reminded the audience of a very real contemporary parallel, the experience of the Orthodox liturgy, but on the other added a mystical quality to the play.

Above all the chorus-ensemble was the connecting presence and force that gave the ritual elements vitality and resonance. They performed the main rites, such as the supplication and burial, but also ‘gave birth’ to the main characters, connected the scenes with the odes seamlessly, staged atmospheric tableaux and sounds and, perhaps most importantly, created a communion with the audience. The whole play then became a ritual enactment of events by the ensemble, aimed at awakening collective memory. Through this ritual the events of the play acquired a double meaning, as reflections of the recent events that the people of Cyprus had experienced.

In 1979 these were innovative elements in the staging of Greek drama. Many of them became staples of Charalambous’ directorial style in the years that followed, but their successful use in the *Suppliants* was never repeated with such force.<sup>311</sup> They in turn became ‘old-fashioned’ aesthetically, but most importantly, subsequent productions lacked the urgency of the *Suppliants*’ political message and the corresponding historical context that made Euripides’ plot and its ritual context extremely resonant.

The way this production affected the participants, its extensive touring and frequent revivals, that marked a generation of Cypriot artists who took part in the chorus of the several re-stagings, is also a testament to its power. Is this coming close to the merging of the identity of the performer and the role, that Schechner talks about in his explorations of theatrical ritual, mentioned earlier in this chapter? Is there a heightened sense of the production’s goals, among the cast, because of the direct experience of enacting known rituals, combined with the historical context? It is hard to say that for certain after all these years, but many people I spoke to used the word μυσταγωγία (mystagogia) to describe the experience of watching the *Suppliants*. It is a religiously-

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<sup>311</sup> See for example reviews of Charalambous’ *Oedipus’ Rex* (1986) and *Hecuba* (1988) in Georgousopoulos and Gogos (2002) 355, 372.

charged word used often in Modern Greek to describe extremely successful theatrical or musical performances in which the audience is completely engrossed and participating spiritually in the events on stage. This word expresses the similarities between the power of theatre and the power of ritual, their ability to bring the participants, spectators and performers alike, to the point of ecstasy, of leaving the here and now to enter a different plane.

The photograph below, from the 1994 revival of the play on the anniversary of the 1974 war, perhaps shows one such instance of *μυσταγωγία*, of *methexis* between the performers and the audience, who were holding lit candles throughout the performance, as is the custom in some special services of the Orthodox Church.



*Figure 2: Pharmakas, A. 1994. Euripides' Suppliants, by the Cyprus Theatre Organisation, July 1994 revival, Nicosia, Cyprus.*

## CHAPTER 5

### THE CHORUS AND ITS POLITICS

*'I understand that an artist is someone who, who amidst the silence of others, uses his voice to say something and who has the obligation that this thing not be useless but something that is of service to mankind.'* (Joan Miro)

*'All art can narrate or represent revolution, but only drama has the potential to enact, through both form and content, optimistic changes in the power relations impossible in the society producing the drama';*<sup>312</sup>

#### 1. Introduction

In the years while I wrote this thesis, the global political situation altered wildly and so did responses to it in Greek theatre performance. At the time of writing this chapter, two recent and positively received productions of Aeschylus' *Persians*, one in California<sup>313</sup> and one in Thessaloniki and Epidauros,<sup>314</sup> have brought home once again the relevance of tragedy as political theatre in our contemporary culture. The oldest tragedy about the folly of pointless war, (or, according to some, about a lament for the folly of pointless war) rang ominous as the world prepared for yet another confrontation between East and West. The choice of this play as a response to the renewed conflict between our Western world and the Middle East is by no means original. Its perceived 'historical' quality (Aeschylus was almost certainly present at the battle of Salamis) seems to add a layer of resonance for the contemporary audiences and is particularly attractive to 'political' directors.<sup>315</sup> Furthermore, for a play with such a specific, non-mythical setting, its ideological re-contextualization changes with each new era: for example, until the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was often interpreted as a celebration of victory, its Athenian perspective adopted by militarist or imperial powers. But more recently it has

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<sup>312</sup> Hall (2010) 25.

<sup>313</sup> *Persians* by Aeschylus, created and Performed by SITI Company, translated by Aaron Poochigian, directed by Anne Bogart, sound design by Darron L West, costume design by Nephelie Andonyadis. Getty Villa, the Barbara and Lawrence Fleischman Theater, September 4-27, 2014.

<sup>314</sup> *Persians* by Aeschylus, translated by Panos Moullas, directed by Nikaiti Kontouri, set design by Yiorgos Patsas, costume design by Yiannis Metzikov, music by Sophia Kamayianni, choreography by Costas Gerardos, lighting design by Lefteris Pavlopoulos, produced by the National Theatre of Northern Greece, Athens and Epidauros festival 2014.

<sup>315</sup> See Taylor (1993).

been interpreted, according to the directorial reading, either as bearing an anti-war message or as containing a warning against the excesses of authority. The 2014 American production was more the former, whereas in the Greek production of the National Theatre of Northern Greece, a critique of corrupt authority was more interesting for the current political context in that country. Thus, in this production, towards the end of the play, after the impact of Xerxes' terrible mistakes as a leader has been fully exposed, Atossa nonetheless bent down and covered her son with the red cloak of a King; a potent gesture that reminded us that corrupt leaders continue to go unpunished while entire countries suffer.<sup>316</sup>

One of the most famous examples of re-contextualizations from the recent past is Peter Sellars' provocative staging of the *Persians* in 1993 as a reaction to the Gulf War, that shocked audiences by presenting the aftermath of the war from the point of view of the defeated Iraqis.<sup>317</sup> I would like to take as a starting point in this chapter Sellars' ideological foundation for his production, as revealed in a 1989 lecture published by Marianne McDonald,<sup>318</sup> in which he describes the perennial goal of political theatre as saying the unspeakable: 'I have come to think of theatre now as almost an alternative information system— what can't be shown on television can be said on-stage.'<sup>319</sup> Of course political theatre nowadays cannot reach as wide an audience as mass media and as such it is not able to completely replace the narrative promoted by them. But this parameter also may safeguard political theatre's intellectual and ideological independence.

What is political theatre? According to Pavis' theatre dictionary,<sup>320</sup> if we take the strict etymological meaning of the word, all theatre is political in that it is of the polis, it is public, it is a social interaction with a specific message. In this chapter, with specific references to Greek tragedy revivals, I will define the *political* as opposed to *personal*, existential or theological issues in the text or in any meta-narrative created by the specific productions. Therefore, the subject matter in the productions discussed will be dominated by issues of power, government, war, the structure of society, national identity, and

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<sup>316</sup> It seems that we cannot start a chapter on politics in contemporary staging of Greek drama without mentioning Aeschylus. Edith Hall has pointed out that *Persians* and *Prometheus Bound* are the two plays with the most political performances from the age of the enlightenment and romanticism until the revolutions of the 20th. (2004) 174.

<sup>317</sup> See Hall (2004) 169-197 for political revivals of *Persians* and *Prometheus Bound* in the 1990s, including an analysis of Sellars' *Persians*.

<sup>318</sup> McDonald (2013).

<sup>319</sup> Sellars quoted in Hall (2004) 184.

<sup>320</sup> Pavis (1998) 'political theatre.'

gender politics. The creators of the works discussed here are using theatre to respond to their sociopolitical context and, most crucially, to provide an alternative message to that of the dominant ideology supported by mass media. The staging of the collective in such theatre productions will be the main focus. I will be asking how the choral *collective* can be a crucial element in politically motivated and oriented contemporary productions of Greek tragedy.

The chorus is a theatrical entity that can, by its nature and function, bring about interaction with the audience on a variety of levels and in a variety of ways. In classical Athens, the connection between participation in public life and participation in the experience of a theatrical performance is actively embodied by the chorus. Therefore, by tapping into this original dynamic, a contemporary director can address a specific contemporary political context, or even issues of social disintegration, alienation, apathy and confusion that dominate the way we experience the world; or simply explore the idea of community in the contemporary sense.

Furthermore, the chorus, through their collective dramatic identity as the people connected to a specific place or to a specific historical event, can become the element that expresses most clearly the parallels between the play's world and a particular period or event from the contemporary context. In other cases, when this 'updating' does not contain specific historical references, as in productions that choose to have a 'timeless' aesthetic, the mere fact that we have a collective on stage creates the potential for the political to be palpable and diachronic. To illustrate the chorus' potential in contemporary political productions I will start with the ancient evidence, the texts themselves and through an analysis of the tragedians' dramaturgical choices of choral dramatic identity and the variations in the convention of choral agency, I hope to illustrate the chorus' pivotal role in the political narrative or meta-narrative of any Greek tragedy production. The behaviour and identity of the chorus have ramifications that are inseparable from the political focus of a play, as well as from the socio-political and aesthetic context of the original productions—or at least as much as we can be sure from our distance in time. Therefore, a careful treatment of these issues by a director today can be equally impactful in a contemporary revival.

The plays which are getting much of the attention of artists and theorists in the new global order, such as *Persians*, have actually attracted avant-garde attention in the previous three decades. And even a production like Sellars' culturally influential *Persians* needs to be seen as part of a 20<sup>th</sup> century trajectory of avant-garde theatre.



Therefore, the second section will include the 20<sup>th</sup> century history of the avant-garde's treatment of Greek tragedy, with particular emphasis on the staging of the collective, from the beginning of Modernity to the 1960s. Specific areas of focus in this section will be the theatre of social message, the theatre of audience participation, the theatre of collective creation and ensemble *mise-en-scène*. While the ancient evidence can provide a foundation for our contemporary interpretations, this overview can help us see more clearly the theatrical tools and conventions available to directors today, as well as the connection between politics, history and performance.

The aim is to look at political incarnations of the chorus on the contemporary stage as part of a longer history of performance aesthetics and ideology. To take just one example, the explosive innovations of late 60s, such as the environmental stagings of Richard Schechner, are the forerunners of today's immersive theatrical experience, but were also preceded by theatrical turning points such as those inspired by the social revolutions of the early 20th century: most specifically, the *Oedipus Rex* of Max Reinhardt in 1910,<sup>321</sup> with the huge chorus which broke the spatial separation of audience and performers, is best understood in the ideological context that brought about the 1905 Bolshevik revolution. Reinhardt's *Oedipus* in turn may have influenced the Russian revolutionary choruses in the newly founded Soviet Union.<sup>322</sup>

The main case study in this chapter will be the work of Vienna-based theatre director Claudia Bosse. In her exemplary practice an inherent contradiction in our perception and interpretation of Greek drama (a contradiction which is part of classical Greek thought) is highlighted and turned into a creative advantage rather than an obstacle: the contrast between individuality and collective identity. This thesis so far has engaged with the idea that one of the main problems for our interpretation of the chorus today is the individualism of contemporary culture: collective identity is something that we strive to achieve in contemporary staging, rarely with success, but which was, by contrast, understood and felt by the Greeks as a result of their ancestral rituals involving *khoreia* but also of the ideological boost given to collective consciousness by the new democratic regime.<sup>323</sup> On the other hand, individualism, this great 'problem' in our society and aesthetic, is, in terms of its origins, historically and culturally inseparable from the

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<sup>321</sup> See Macintosh (2013) on Reinhardt's *Oedipus*, the impressive use of the crowd chorus and the efforts to emulate the effect of this chorus. (348)

<sup>322</sup> See Fischer-Lichte (2013) 352.

<sup>323</sup> See chapter 3.

humanist tradition. This tradition of course owes much to the philosophy of classical Greece and to the great heroes of tragedy. The society which produced these heroes created a system of direct democracy and proceeded to criticise and challenge it through one of its most popular art forms, drama. Claudia Bosse recognizes this inherent paradox in the original texts and their social context and her work on choruses capitalizes on the creative conflict between individuality and participation in the community. For Bosse and Theatercombinat this is a theatrical enactment of a relationship which is crucial to our participation in contemporary democracy and thus the performances are almost like training grounds for a more active citizen experience.

The final section of this chapter will be devoted to a description of a proposed contemporary performance of *Iphigenia in Aulis*, which would underline the play's strong political themes and would focus on the chorus. The purpose is to demonstrate in practice a potential directorial and dramaturgical analysis which would give the chorus a central place through emphasis on contemporary political themes, in a play in which the chorus is notoriously apolitical and marginalized during the course of the play.

## **2. The Ancient Evidence: The classical Athenian cultural context for the chorus**

*It was for the collective discussion of just such large issues, Sellars believes, that the Greeks invented theatre - 'as a preparation for jury duty, really, so they could judge what was just or unjust in complicated cases. 20,000 citizens would be sitting together watching discussions of rape, incest, murder and how you treated the prisoners in the last war - everything you wouldn't dream of talking about in polite conversation.'*<sup>324</sup>

The investigation of the fluidity and experimental nature of the original performances, an investigation which ultimately looks beyond the formal elements and emphasizes the performance's interaction with the cultural context, is the recurring theme in my argument. Viewing tragedy as an ever-evolving genre leads to questioning absolutes about the form, function and interpretation of the dramatic chorus then and now.

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<sup>324</sup> Pappenheim (1993).

In this chapter I would like to discuss in more detail the main points from the ancient evidence that are particularly relevant to the discussion of its political dimension, going into more depth as regards questions of identity and agency.

### **i. Participating in a dramatic chorus: a political act**

In the society of classical Athens there didn't seem to be any doubt as to the social and political effects of art, especially theatre. The most obvious and famous example for this attitude probably comes from Plato's *Laws*, where the Athenian lays down the strict framework in which choral performance, widely defined, would function educationally in his ideal city to create good citizens, but is very suspicious of the particular genre of the dramatic chorus, and of tragedy in general. The truest tragedy is, according to the philosopher, the constitution of the city, and the poets the citizens themselves:

‘ὦ ἄριστοι,’ φάναι, ‘τῶν ξένων, ἡμεῖς ἐσμὲν τραγωδίας αὐτοὶ ποιηταὶ κατὰ δύναμιν ὅτι καλλίστης ἅμα καὶ ἀρίστης: πᾶσα οὖν ἡμῖν ἡ πολιτεία συνέστηκε μίμησις τοῦ καλλίστου καὶ ἀρίστου βίου, ὃ δὴ φάμεν ἡμεῖς γε ὄντως εἶναι τραγωδίαν τὴν ἀληθεστάτην.

Most excellent of Strangers, we ourselves, to the best of our ability, are the authors of a tragedy at once superlatively fair and good; at least, all our polity is framed as a representation of the fairest and best life, which is in reality, as we assert, the truest tragedy.

Plato's *Laws*, 817b. Translated by R.G. Bury

Furthermore, the poets who visit the city would never be allowed to say things in their place that go against the moral and political rules that govern it.

μὴ δὲ δόξητε ἡμᾶς ῥαδίως γεοῦτως ὑμᾶς ποτε παρ' ἡμῖν ἐάσειν σκηνάς τε πῆξαντας κατ' ἀγορὰν καὶ καλλιφώνους ὑποκριτὰς εἰσαγαγομένους, μὲν εἰζονφεγομένους ἡμῶν, ἐπιτρέψειν ὑμῖν δημηγορεῖν πρὸς παῖδας τε καὶ ἱγυναῖκας καὶ τὸν πάντα ὄχλον, τῶν αὐτῶν λέγοντας ἐπιτηδευμάτων περὶ μὴ τὰ αὐτὰ ἅπερ ἡμεῖς, ἀλλ' ὥς τὸ πολὺ καὶ ἐναντία τὰ πλεῖστα.

Do not imagine, then, that we will ever thus lightly allow you to set up your stage beside us in the marketplace, and give permission to those imported actors of yours, with their dulcet tones and their voices louder than ours, to harangue women and children and the whole populace, and

to say not the same things as we say about the same institutions, but, on the contrary, things that are, for the most part, just the opposite.

Platos *Laws*, 817c. Translated by R.G.Bury

Wilson has stressed the anxiety of Plato as evidence for the perceived political power of tragedy.<sup>325</sup>

This radical hijacking of the title of tragic poet by the citizens qua citizens, and of tragedy by the city's very political structure, points to the depth of anxiety over its power. Expulsion or rejection will not work; appropriation and coerced redefinition are the only effective alternatives.<sup>326</sup>

Similarly, the premise for the plot of Aristophanes' *Frogs*, produced in 405 BC, just before the end of the Peloponnesian War, reflects the centrality of tragedy in Athenian civic identity for an entire century.<sup>327</sup> Greek drama since the beginning was considered by the society that gave birth to it to be what we call political art, that is art directly influenced by and seen as having a significant impact on public life.

The main dramatic festival of City Dionysia was an event of huge scale organised by the state and supported by public funds as well as wealthy individuals. The extremely costly, state-run, ideologically charged and universally popular dramatic festival has very few parallels in modern times, and they come from the realm of sports: perhaps the FIFA World Cup, international athletics competitions and the Eurovision song contest can be a parallel in terms of scale. But this festival was much closer to the everyday life and the personal experience of an Athenian citizen than these glamorous contemporary examples, due to the participatory nature of the events surrounding the festival and of the festival itself. Furthermore, drama was a new and ground-breaking Athenian invention, and so the festival was an opportunity to celebrate (and show off) something that was really their own. State subsidy was crucial: Wilson again mentions a particularly striking point made by Demosthenes, on the economic aspect of the festival, giving us a glimpse of a surprising cultural trait. In a speech before the Assembly in 351, the orator claims, perhaps with some rhetorical exaggeration, that the festivals are far better organised than

<sup>325</sup> See Chapter 3 for Wilson's analysis the original sociopolitical context of the plays.

<sup>326</sup> Wilson (2000) 2.

<sup>327</sup> See especially *Frogs* ll. 1006-1044 about tragedy's ability to shape the moral character of the Athenians and 1417-1533, in which the final outcome of the poetry contest is decided by the advice Euripides and Aeschylus give for the salvation of the city. See also pp. 40-41 of this thesis.

any of the military expeditions, the khoregoi are appointed by law, everything runs like clockwork, whereas the military matters are a complete mess.<sup>328</sup>

καίτοι τί δή ποτ', ὧ ἄνδρες Ἀθηναῖοι, νομίζετε τὴν μὲν τῶν Παναθηναίων ἑορτὴν καὶ τὴν τῶν Διονυσίων αἰεὶ τοῦ καθήκοντος χρόνου γίνεσθαι, ἅν τε δεινοὶ λάχωσιν ἅν τ' ἰδιῶται οἱ τούτων ἐκατέρων ἐπιμελούμενοι, εἰς ἃ τοσαῦτ' ἀναλίσκεται χρήματα, ὅς οὐδ' εἰς ἓν αὐτῶν ἀποστόλων, καὶ τοσοῦτον ὄχλον καὶ παρασκευὴν ὅσῃ οὐκ οἶδ' εἴ τι τῶν ἀπάντων ἔχει, τοὺς δ' ἀποστόλους πάντας ὅμῃν ὑστερίζειν τῶν καιρῶν, τὸν εἰς Μεθώνην, τὸν εἰς Παγασάς, τὸν εἰς Ποτείδαιαν; ὅτι ἐκεῖνα μὲν ἅπαντα νόμῳ τέτακται, καὶ πρόοιδεν ἕκαστος ὅμῃν ἐκ πολλοῦ τίς χορηγὸς ἢ γυμνασίάρχος τῆς φυλῆς, πότε καὶ παρὰ τοῦ καὶ τί λαβόντα τί δεῖ ποιεῖν, οὐδὲν ἀνεξέταστον οὐδ' ἀόριστον ἐν τούτοις ἡμέληται: ἐν δὲ τοῖς περὶ τοῦ πολέμου καὶ τῆς τοῦτου παρασκευῆς ἄτακτα, ἀδιόρθωτα, ἀόρισθ' ἅπαντα.

And yet, men of Athens, how do you account for the fact that the Panathenaic festival and the Dionysia are always held at the right date, whether experts or laymen are chosen by lot to manage them, that larger sums are lavished upon them than upon any one of your expeditions, that they are celebrated with bigger crowds and greater splendor than anything else of the kind in the world, whereas your expeditions invariably arrive too late, whether at Methone or at Pagasae or at Potidaea? The explanation is that at the festivals everything is ordered by statute; every man among you knows long beforehand who of his tribe is to provide the chorus or who to equip the gymnasium, what he is to receive, when and from whom he is to receive it, and what he is to do; nothing here is left to chance, nothing is undetermined: but in what pertains to war and its equipment, everything is ill-arranged, ill-managed, ill-defined.

Demosthenes, *Philippic* 1.35-36. Translated by J.H. Vince

But aside from economics, there are some ideological and aesthetic characteristics of the festival that influence the political character of the dramatic chorus. First of all, although choral performance was ubiquitous in social and cultural life outside the theatre, one important function of the dramatic chorus, at least in some of the dramatic plots, was a concrete theatrical realisation of a central concern of the new democratic ideology: the constant tension between the individual, the aristocratic hero, and the collective, the community represented by the chorus. Goldhill identifies this tension as one of the structuring principles of tragedy.<sup>329</sup> This theme, reflected in the form and recurring in the content of many of the plays, is more fully realised theatrically by the particular form of tragedy, a genre combining dramatic action in the epeisodia as well as choral lyric, choral

<sup>328</sup> Wilson (2000) 51.

<sup>329</sup> Goldhill (2007) 47.

dance but also choral communal dramatic identity and communal utterance within the dramatic action. It is widely held that the chorus, representing the people, more temperate than the protagonist, either survives the fate of the protagonist caused by his/her own transgression, and/or is directly affected by it through no fault of their own.<sup>330</sup>

This ideological content underlined by form is further enhanced by aesthetics and custom: the chorus, contrary to the named characters played by professional actors, was, at least in the early years, made up of amateurs chosen from each deme, who rehearsed together for six months, learning complex choreography and lyric, sometimes fed and housed throughout the rehearsal period by the khoregos.<sup>331</sup> This means that many audience members had participated or would in turn participate in a dramatic chorus. Almost everyone must have participated in a form of khoreia in their life, if not in a dramatic performance.

The numerous rules and regulations surrounding the dramatic chorus is further evidence of its civic importance. According to the scholion to Aristophanes' *Plutus* 954 there were laws in place to ensure that chorus members at the Great Dionysia were Athenian citizens, while at the Lenaea the regulation was less strict, allowing resident foreigners to participate.<sup>332</sup> Pseudo-Ancocides *Against Alcibiades* 20-21 and Demosthenes *Against Meidias* 60 make reference to a law that gave any citizen the right to eject from the theatre, during a performance, a khoreut whom he considered to be a foreigner.<sup>333</sup> Furthermore, it seems that the khoregos had some powers of compulsion when recruiting a chorus, and that participating in a chorus may have been a duty and a burden, much like jury duty. Demosthenes' *Against Meidias* 15 may be evidence that khoreuts were exempt from military duty.<sup>334</sup>

Thus the experience of attending the theatre, but also of participating in the theatrical performance, is a part of democratic citizen life much like jury duty, military service, attending the assembly and participating in the numerous religious festivals throughout the year that marked Athenian foundation myths, created bonds among the citizenry and reinforced the ideological narrative of the new Athenian republic and empire.

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<sup>330</sup> Foley (2003) provides a useful summary and categorisation of the main scholarly views on choral agency and characterisation. But her overarching argument, which I find convincing, is that many of these conclusions, based on extant choruses, need to be seen as 'trends rather than conventions.' (14)

<sup>331</sup> Wilson (2000) 85-94.

<sup>332</sup> Csapo and Slater (1995) 135 and 351-52.

<sup>333</sup> Csapo and Slater (1995) 153 and 351.

<sup>334</sup> Csapo and Slater (1995) 359 and 154.

## **ii. Dramatic identity and agency of the chorus: more possibilities**

It is generally true that for many of the extant tragedies one can summarise the plot without mentioning the chorus and today most reviews of a contemporary staging of a Greek tragedy, if they talk about the chorus at all, will most probably comment on their ability to sing, dance, or recite the heightened poetic text.

However, in this chapter I will take as a springboard the observations in Chapter 3 on the importance of choral authority for the world of the play and the interpretation of the myths, in order to re-examine the chorus' dramaturgical importance for contemporary theatre. We saw that their apparent social marginality does not preclude their moral, ethical, philosophical superiority. Furthermore, combining social marginality and moral, religious, spiritual authority, invites the audience of Athenian citizens to imagine the experience of the Other.<sup>335</sup> This is the first hint that the choice of choral identity is the beginning of the socio-political commentary inserted into the myth by the tragedian.

Taking this further, we see an interesting paradox created by the dramatic chorus' ideological basis in the democratic edifice and by their dramatic identity which can never, as far as we know, be identified with the ruling citizen body of Athens: this is the beginning of the discussion of tragedy as daring, even subversive, political theatre. It is a fact that the chorus are theatrically portraying the disenfranchised, the marginalised, the weak, in a society that created extremely strict rules about citizenship, excluding people on the basis of their nationality, origin, gender, status. At the same time the genre of tragedy, formally, through the chorus, dramatises the power of the collective, i.e. the great Athenian political innovation. These two seemingly contradictory things happening on stage before the assembled citizens and the leadership create many possibilities for radical political theatre. Thus the question of choral agency, of the collective taking action, can offer many possibilities for the contemporary director.

With regard to the chorus' actual involvement in the dramatic action, that is the possibility for independent action, opinion, assertiveness, and how these relate to choral fictive identity, I believe that Helene Foley's thorough examination<sup>336</sup> has challenged pre-existing notions of the chorus' inactivity. Foley's conclusions, based on the plots, choral characterisation in the drama, as well as on the aesthetics and context of the festival, can

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<sup>335</sup> See Chapter 3 pp.92-94.

<sup>336</sup> Foley (2003).

be summarised as follows: there can be no generally applicable conclusions or solutions regarding the chorus' independence and ability to act, whether related to their gender, nationality or even according to who wrote the play. Secondly, the chorus is 'not by any generic definition incapable of action and important initiatives, even in late Euripides.'<sup>337</sup> On the contrary, there is a very wide range of choral actions and behaviour, from the ritual to the political to the personal, that is available to the tragedians. The choice and degree of action and agency is crucial to the interpretation of the play. And thirdly, despite their lower social status, formal and stylistic elements of their theatrical presence make the chorus as important or more important than the main characters: far from being marginal in the experience of watching Greek drama performed, they are a focal point of the *mise-en-scène*, utter some of the most amazing and memorable parts of the text and are an essential part of the spectacle.<sup>338</sup>

Foley's observations invite us to think more about the potential and the freedom of the choral form, but also have ramifications in the sphere of politically-charged performance. I would like to give here a few specific examples of her analysis, since this way of thinking strengthens my core argument about tragedy as an experimental and radical form: a form that, while being part of the Athenian state's ideological foundation, relentlessly revealed the cracks in this foundation.

First, on the issue of choral identity, Foley agrees with scholars who have shown that it is not possible, based on the extant evidence, to draw any definite statistical results in terms of the choice of gender, nationality, status, age etc. by each of the tragedians.<sup>339</sup> So instead she focuses on the differences, exceptions and variations available to each tragedian at any given time, thus supporting a view of tragedy as an evolving and experimental genre.

In her examination of choral agency, Foley argues that it is not always dependent on fictive identity. First of all, she examines the agency of the female chorus, women supposedly being the most lacking in agency and initiative in classical Greece, and finds that:

Female choruses in tragedy who act or attempt to act or suffer risk are [...] very possibly more common, than male choruses, even if they often take

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<sup>337</sup> Foley (2003) 24.

<sup>338</sup> Foley (2003) 24-25.

<sup>339</sup> Foley (2003) 13-17.



action, as is also the case with female characters, in contexts relating to revenge/ conspiracy, suppliance, or funerary and other rituals.<sup>340</sup>

Foley gives many examples where female choruses take an active role that influences the plot, while also being involved in the political sphere and not just in domestic matters.<sup>341</sup> The strong ritual function of the female dramatic chorus, which corresponds to women's significant religious role in Athenian society, can be political, as they may use ritual and religious bonds to create political and cultural bonds:

[B]y being less linked with a specific political system or set of priorities, female choruses can offer a broader vision of cultural commonalities, even if they often focus less on political realities. Sometimes they could even be said to reconstitute a kind of fragile and beleaguered community, often a community based on ritual, in the face of physical threats, slavery, or a shattered world that makes little sense (Aeschylus *Supplikes*; Euripides *Troades* and *Hecuba*).<sup>342</sup>

In chapter 4 I discussed the importance of culturally specific ritual in contemporary adaptations of Greek tragedy re-contextualized in communities dealing with political and cultural oppression, disenfranchisement, war, and colonization. Foley shows that the performance of ritual actions and the use of ritual language, mostly by the chorus, can be politically charged and radical even in the original context of the plays.

With regard to choral agency in general, irrespective of gender, although it is possible to observe that choruses from Aeschylus to Euripides are gradually shorter and their roles more passive,<sup>343</sup> Foley shows through examination of important exceptions, such as the play *Rhesus*, the possibility that the genre began evolving in the opposite direction in the late 5th and early 4th century.<sup>344</sup> The involvement of this particular chorus in the plot ranges from significant actions such as serving as night-watchers, waking up Hector, to verbal interventions that persuade the main characters for certain courses of action. This chorus is 'aggressive in pursuit of its duty' and 'willing to take responsibility for its actions'.<sup>345</sup> They also leave the orchestra, another sign of their independence and

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<sup>340</sup> Foley (2003) 17.

<sup>341</sup> Foley (2003) 21-22.

<sup>342</sup> Foley (2003) 23.

<sup>343</sup> Foley (2003) 14.

<sup>344</sup> Foley (2003) 18.

<sup>345</sup> Foley (2003) 18.

ability to transcend the space conventions. Foley notes that their behaviour is very different to that of the two other extant military choruses, those of *Ajax* and *Philoctetes*, who are much less active and seem completely dependent on their leaders, whom they never take action to oppose. Based on the case of *Rhesus*, and of her analysis of several other instances, Foley concludes that ‘choral action in tragedy seems to depend less on a physical or moral incapacity to act than on a need for, or duty or inclination to accept, leadership or commitment in a range of specific contexts.’<sup>346</sup>

### iii. Conclusion

The ability of the chorus to act within the dramatic plot, to transcend boundaries of gender or nationality, to be constantly negotiating their relationship to leadership, to be actively engaged in becoming a community or to disagree amongst themselves, to use a ritual act as a weapon or as a bond or as a political statement, and finally, to be the focal point of performance, all have to do with the political interpretation or re-interpretation of a well-known myth in a Greek tragedy. The chorus is often a collective of the disenfranchised, those excluded from citizen rights by the new order but, at the same time, it is a collective with authority. Furthermore, because it is a collective that can often make mistakes and appear misguided, especially in the case of Euripides, it can also denote an implied challenge to the principles of direct democracy by the author.

The ideologically charged issue of the relationship between the people and the individual hero, a great source of tension in the democratic polis, is far from simple in its theatrical expression, in tragedy. The chorus’ ability or inability to act in a way that affects the plot and hero is always an open issue to be used dramaturgically to great effect by the tragedian. Furthermore, with regard to theatrical tradition and convention, the reversal of expectations, the dramaturgical innovations and the exploration of formal boundaries, can galvanize the political content of a play and of a particular production.

The aspects of choral identity and agency discussed here drew the attention of classicists only subsequent, and consequent to the work of theatre practitioners like Richard Schechner and Peter Sellars. Often, contemporary theatre practice illuminates aspects of the original texts. Of course such innovations in political theatre would not have been possible without the 20<sup>th</sup> century tradition based on the legacy of Piscator and

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<sup>346</sup> Foley (2003) 19.

Brecht. Therefore, it becomes clear at this point that in order to analyze directorial approaches to the Greek chorus today, we need to put them in the historical context of the theatrical avant-garde's treatment of the collective in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, during which time the connection between aesthetic innovation and political relevance has a renewed emphasis.

### **3. Staging the collective: 20<sup>th</sup>-century experimentation in political theatre**

#### **i. Introduction**

The re-kindling of interest in Greek tragedy since the late sixties and the surge of theatre productions that followed are often explained in terms of the socio-political concerns of avant-garde directors in a time of global social and political upheaval. The Attic dramatists' focus on issues of the state has given us some of the most profound reflections on power, war and social conflict. Therefore it is not surprising then that directors aiming to make a social or political statement through their work turned to the Greek classics.<sup>347</sup>

The 20th century has been called the century of revolution. In his prologue to the edition *Le siècle rebelle, Dictionnaire de la contestation au XXe siècle*, Emmanuel de Waresquiel writes:

Revolution (uprising) is everywhere in the 20th century, in both life and art [...] art is conquered by life [in the 20th century] ...[art] doesn't want to stay in the confines of the past.<sup>348</sup>  
(my translation)

Under the lemma *Avant-Garde* (avant-garde) in the same edition we find:

It is impossible to talk about the 20th century without referring to an endless series of avant-garde movements, some less known than others. The word avant-garde, deeply rooted in contemporary terminology, is used to characterise a multitude of phenomena [...] both in politics and culture.  
(my translation)

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<sup>347</sup> See especially Hall, Macintosh and Wrigley (2004) on how the avant-garde movement of the 1960s played a major role in creating a renewed interest in Greek drama and re-inventing it as an exciting part of contemporary repertoire.

<sup>348</sup> De Waresquiel (1998) Introduction, p.12

Throughout this rich history of innovation, with politically-driven artistic movements constantly oscillating between opposition to the establishment and becoming assimilated by the mainstream and thus neutralised, there are certain ideological and artistic turning points that are particularly pertinent in a discussion of the chorus. These are moments in theatrical history when artists attempt politically charged explorations of staging the collective, even including the collective of the audience in the performance. The triple focus of this section is on staging *collectives* in the form of large groups of performers, on including the audience in the staging of the collective, and on collective creation. The artists I choose to mention have had a lasting influence on theatre aesthetics. In many ways our work today continues to be shaped by their legacy. Inevitably the overwhelming majority have a critical stance towards the status quo and a strong ideological foundation in their work. This overview does not focus on mass spectacles of questionable artistic merit that were used as propaganda for a dominant ideology,<sup>349</sup> with the exception of the Revolutionary choruses of the Soviet Union that are mentioned in passing due to their structural similarities with the Greek chorus, that were in turn emulated by avant-garde, anti-establishment artists some decades later.

## ii. Historical precedents since Modernism

In the early 20th century, the Russian revolution sent ideological shock waves throughout Europe, and the work of the avant-garde of the period circa 1917 is the culmination of the artistic and ideological currents that lead to and supported the Revolution. This is also the moment of the birth of agit-prop. This practice created a huge amount of theatre groups in the USSR. This political theatre of propaganda, that very often sacrifices artistic values to serve an overt political line, is worth mentioning here due to its scale and its ability to reach the widest social strata. Agit-prop theatre used a theatrical language that returned to traditional folk roots and was thus more accessible to the working class, while part of its purpose was to reach the widest possible audience.<sup>350</sup>

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<sup>349</sup> For choric theatre used as propaganda tool by the Soviet Union, the Nazi party and the Zionist movement see Fischer-Lichte (2013).

<sup>350</sup> The numbers speak for themselves: according to De Waresquiel (1998), it is estimated that in the USSR in the 1920s the Red Army and Fleet were in charge of 1800 societies that had in turn founded 1210 theatre companies and 911 theatre clubs. In 1927 there were 3500 workers' associations with 2 million members. The theatre groups of these associations had 200 000 active members who performed before 100 million every year. (De Waresquiel (1998) 'agit-prop').

In this kind of theatre, characterised by strong folk elements, often a chorus of singers or narrators is employed, to summarise or emphasise the political message.<sup>351</sup> Edith Hall has noted the natural affinity of Russian artists of the revolution for the Greek chorus:

The revolutionary potential of Greek theatrical chorality was more clearly realised than ever before in revolutionary Russia, but it was of course built into the medium from the moment of its genesis. The Greek tragic choruses which have survived are the products of democratic Athens, a society which had recently given more political power to more – and poorer – people than any previously. [...] the chorus as the revolutionary workers' collective perhaps attained its own 'supreme manifestation' in the great public performances held in Russia in the years immediately after the 1917 revolution, which were enacted by large groups of ordinary people.<sup>352</sup>

These theatrical realisations of the collective, built on the ideological foundation of class struggle, bear some similarities to political stagings of the collective in the West in the 1960s, another era of social upheaval in Europe and America. But the movements of the 60s are preceded chronologically by, and owe a lot to, the epic theatre of Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht. This theatre demanded the participation of the audience in the theatrical event, both mentally and physically. Piscator talked much about 'total theatre' (Totaltheater), using the phrase to refer to a kind of theatre in which 'the spectator is at the centre of the space and is surrounded from a total scene, he is totally confronted by it.'<sup>353</sup> This is political theatre with a strong left-wing ideology that explores the boundaries between the spectators and what is enacted and as such is interesting in the history of theatrical collectives on stage and in the auditorium.

Brecht famously calls for the audience to have a critical, not emotional, relationship to the events on stage, to be intellectually alert, to participate by remaining emotionally 'distanced'. But the idea of the active spectator, inherent in Epic Theatre, is further developed in the 'Lehrstück', the Learning-play, developed by Brecht from the

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<sup>351</sup> It is difficult to start the discussion of political theatre of the early 20th century without mentioning the sociopolitical issues of the late 19th century and how they are reflected in theatre, in particular on the interpretation of the Greek chorus. See for example Goldhill (2013) on the relationship between the ideologies of the period of Modernity and the staging of the chorus, who emphasises the importance of German idealism and nationalism for the 19th century perception of the Greek chorus as a collective. Hall (2013) argues that there is a variety of ideological influences and movements that shape positive or negative perceptions of the chorus in the 19th century. She emphasises its revolutionary potential, particularly in relation the new and dynamic collective of the working class.

<sup>352</sup> Hall (2013).

<sup>353</sup> Pavis (1998) 'total theatre'.

1920s to the late 1930s and founded on the principle that the spectator can learn through acting, taking on roles, using the posture, gesture and attitude of characters.<sup>354</sup> The divide between actors and audience is thus further diminished.

Brecht's work marks another turning point in the history of connection and affinity between the Greek chorus and contemporary political theatre. Martin Revermann writes:

Brecht's attraction to chorality in its own right, without Greek tragedy looming in the background as a catalyst, is rooted both in his theatre aesthetics and in his political and ideological position (two areas which for Brecht, of course, cannot possibly and reasonably be separated).<sup>355</sup>

Although they started as artistic collaborators, there is an essential difference between Brecht's epic theatre and Piscator's political theatre. Whether he is working in Germany or in America, Brecht's work is a constant call for questioning the status quo. He is interested in exposing the social context that defines the individual's actions, and in particular in exposing oppressive ideologies, whether right wing or left wing, that hinder critical thinking. Often the collective, the mass, is deceived and enslaved by these ideologies. Thus, he often subverts the idea of the wisdom of the chorus' collective, or the idea that collective identity/ ideology is a positive thing. As Revermann points out, one of the most striking examples is the chorus of Brecht's *Antigone*: who are 'Complicit in Creon's crimes [...] a group of perpetrators as much as victims.'<sup>356</sup> Revermann sums up the distinctive character of Brechtian chorality by defining it in relation to the Greek chorus. The essential similarity with Greek chorality is 'the 'tapping into' the collective experience and 'pointing beyond' the here and now of the dramatic action to a larger framework -human condition.'<sup>357</sup>

But the crucial difference that Revermann stresses between Greek and Brechtian chorality is that tragedy re-affirms the status quo, whereas Brecht calls the audience to take action towards change.<sup>358</sup>

In the previous section I argued in support of the view that tragedy can in fact be a subversive genre that does much more than just re-affirm the status quo. This element

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<sup>354</sup> See Pavis (1998) 'didactic play', 'didactic theatre'.

<sup>355</sup> Revermann (2013) 234.

<sup>356</sup> Revermann (2013) 158.

<sup>357</sup> Revermann (2013) 164.

<sup>358</sup> Revermann (2013) 164-5.

of questioning is what makes Greek drama particularly interesting and influential for the 20th and 21st century directors, who, at some point, are questioning all established ideologies. It is also true, however, that Brecht's work is an essential chapter in the evolution of the contemporary political director: for contemporary artists the subversive power of tragedy is, in many ways, filtered through the work of visionary theatre makers such as Brecht, who re-visited the classics with an iconoclastic mood.

### iii. The collective staged by the theatrical avant-garde since the 1960s

This explosive period for art and politics in the West, which culminated in 1968, led to a surge in productions of Greek drama in the 70s. This is also the time when the term 'Regietheater' first appeared in Germany, referring to a movement which redefined the director's, and the audience's, relationship with the classics, which so far had been characterised by reverence, the task of the director seen as merely interpretative. But during this period the focus shifted onto the performance itself, and the actualisation or topicality of a play, instead of the text.<sup>359</sup> This tendency was not confined to Germany, but signaled a new era in Western theatre in general.

Greek drama during the three decades following the 'revolution' of the late 60s is examined thoroughly by the edited volume *Dionysus since 69*, with special emphasis on the sociopolitical context of each production. For the purposes of this chapter I will focus on the participatory and collective-oriented work from the late 60s and 70s by politically-driven artists. This is art that emphasises the communal aspect of creativity, the communication between performer and spectator and the transformational potential of art. This is perhaps not a new idea in the history of theatre, but this time it comes with a strong theoretical foundation, since this is the period when theatre theory and anthropology are also rapidly developing.<sup>360</sup> This kind of theatre, in this fertile political and academic climate, re-examines the relationship between the artist and society in a much more self-conscious way than previously. As this is an era of big social movements, theatre is often a call for participation in political life, for taking action towards social reform, for reacting against traditional social codes as well as against capitalism. As such,

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<sup>359</sup> See Fischer-Lichthe (2004) on German experiments with Greek tragedy in the 70s, and especially pp.342-343 for the rise of Regietheater.

<sup>360</sup> See chapter 4 of this thesis for the main anthropological studies of this period that had an impact on the staging of Greek drama.

this theatre can be radical in varying degrees. Theatre techniques such as ensemble work, environmental staging, audience participation, and ritual theatre emerge from the ideological foundation of this period.

At the same time many theatre artists are changing the economics and management of the way theatre is created. The break with the theatrical establishment is not only aesthetic and theoretical, but also comes with a practical application of their anti-capitalist stance. This is more than art, more than a job, it is a way of life: in an era during which the commune flourished, theatre companies are founded on the principles of shared work and shared profit, as well as shared artistic creation.

A famous example is Théâtre du Soleil, founded in France in 1964 by Ariane Mnouchkine and her collaborators, on communal principles, shared labour and shared profits. Their work was then and continues to be a commentary on various historical, social and political issues and events. Théâtre du Soleil are also a company who do much research together, experiment with form and study other theatre cultures in depth, in order to expand the scope of their own work. The communal aspect of their organisation is in harmony with the ideology behind political works of grand scale, such as *1789* and *Le Dernier Caravanseraï*, performed in the ensemble style. They are also the company that gave us one of the most famous adaptations of the Oresteia in recent years, *Les Atrides* (1990-92).<sup>361</sup>

In the US the work of the Living Theater, an experimental theatre group founded in 1947 as a response against the realistic and commercial theatre of Broadway, reached its peak in the 60s and 70s. The founders were Judith Malina, a German-born student of Erwin Piscator, and abstract expressionist painter Julian Beck. The company was a community sharing the work and profit, often facing great financial and legal troubles. The anti-establishment, anti-capitalist ideological basis of their work permeated their way of life. Founders Beck and Malina were also political activists who often ended up in jail. The company explored a new relationship between actors and audience, between the auditorium and the stage, that influenced other avant-garde theatre groups of the era. Indeed their interaction with the audience has been characterised as almost aggressive.<sup>362</sup> In their 1968 *Antigone*,<sup>363</sup> first performed in a Carmelite Monastery in the Avignon

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<sup>361</sup> See pp.9, 33, 35, 118 and 250 of this thesis for more details on this production.

<sup>362</sup> Foley (2012) 134.

<sup>363</sup> *Antigone*, directed by Julian Beck and Judith Malina, text by Sophocles, adaptation by Bertolt Brecht, produced by the Living Theatre and Avignon Festival.



festival and then later in the U.S., the clear anti-Vietnam war message and the strong interaction with the audience, who represented the army of Argos, were integral part of the mise-en-scène.<sup>364</sup> According to their website one of the perennial characteristics of their work is that ‘the spectators become actors, they are included, the goal is to take them out of their comfort zone, to create tension.’<sup>365</sup> Part of this aesthetic is the staging of plays in non-traditional venues in which the audience/performer separation is absent or fluid. In the 1970’s, they created *The Legacy of Cain*, a cycle of plays staged at prisons, factories, slums and schools all over the world, free of charge. The company continues to this day to explore the audience-performer relationship in their plays and happenings and specific techniques for audience participation.<sup>366</sup>

In the 60s the experiments of theatre director and anthropologist Richard Schechner marked another new development in the staging of the collective. In 1968 Schechner staged his famous adaptation of the *Bacchae*, *Dionysus in 69*, encompassing an examination of contemporary chorality, audience participation through environmental staging and audience-performer interaction, as well as ritual theatre with strong political undertones and a revolutionary mood.<sup>367</sup>

The 60s also saw great innovation in the staging of the chorus coming from Greece, with the revolutionary approach of Karolos Koun, who, as we saw in previous chapter, broke with the established tradition in the staging of the chorus. His left-wing ideology and aesthetic, during a time of political crisis in Greece that would eventually lead to a military dictatorship, brought the chorus to the centre of the action. In his much-discussed *Persians* (1965) he abandoned strict choreography, which had been the norm dominating Greek drama revivals in Greece since the 1930s, and instead created organic movement from improvisation, thus humanising the collective.<sup>368</sup>

The period after the fall of the Berlin Wall marked another ideological turning point in the West. In the 90s, the trend of participatory art reaches a peak and takes many forms: site-specific performances or installations, the evolution of the environmental stagings of the 1960s, take place more and more frequently in non-theatrical, non-

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<sup>364</sup> For a more detailed description of the performance see Foley (2012) 132-138.

<sup>365</sup> The Living Theatre, History (n.d.)

<sup>366</sup> Their latest production, *No Place to Hide*, ‘looks at the reasons and consequences of hiding and invites the audience to explore alternatives together with the ensemble.’ (The Living Theatre, Current Production, n.d.)

<sup>367</sup> See Zeitlin (2004) 49-75 for and detailed description of the performance and and Meineck (2013) 381-382 on how Schechner created a community in *Dionysus in 69*.

<sup>368</sup> See Chapter 2 of this thesis for a more extensive discussion of Koun’s contribution to the staging of the chorus.

conventional spaces; audience interaction is a frequent element of theatrical performances or exhibitions; documentary theatre flourishes, with or without amateur participation. Ideologically this period is marked by pessimism created by the absence of an ideological alternative to capitalism in the horizon, and then by left-wing reaction to the rise of neo-liberalism.<sup>369</sup> During this time participatory art, especially the visual arts, is seen by many historians and curators as the ultimate form of political art and begins to be theorised extensively.<sup>370</sup>

The art curator Nicolas Bourriaud, perhaps the most famous theorist of participatory art, writes:

[T]he role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real, whatever the scale chosen by the artist.<sup>371</sup>

In this kind of art, the collective is clearly the audience, who are not the audience any more: instead they become participants in the creation of the artwork. In the 21st century this kind of art has since been challenged and criticised. Among other reasons, its socio-political message of emancipation and revolution seems to be in direct contrast with its tendency to create a super-star artist, whose mere presence is enough for the ‘art-work’ to take place.<sup>372</sup> Nonetheless, audience participation by now has a long history and has been established as part of the theatrical language of the 21st century.

#### iv. Conclusion

When we talk about political adaptations that focus on the collective, we have, in the West at least, a performance history starting as early as the late 19th century. It is as

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<sup>369</sup> See Mee and Foley (2011), on contemporary productions of Greek drama outside of Europe and North America, who realise the choral collective through the political and social issues dominating those adaptations, such as ethnic identity, decolonisation, political and cultural freedom.

<sup>370</sup> For a study of participatory art encompassing both theatre and the visual arts see Jackson (2011). For a historical overview and critique of participatory art, which challenges its political and aesthetic claims, see Bishop (2012).

<sup>371</sup> Bourriaud (2002) 13.

<sup>372</sup> See Bishop (2005).

part of this history that I would like to discuss the work of Claudia Bosse and her company Theatercombinat. Their radical work on staging the collective in the 21st century is influenced by the legacy of Brecht but also by their interest in the system of direct democracy of classical Athens. Their revivals of Aeschylus in recent years are a significant contribution in the evolution of participatory theatre and site-specific performance. Their work directly refers to and responds to current politics, and is based on thorough historical research and lengthy preparation. The importance of context and research often lead Theatercombinat to re-work the same play over a period of years, continuing to explore and enrich the key ingredients of their ideological foundation and aesthetic expression.

#### **4. The choruses of Claudia Bosse and Theatercombinat**

*the question is not to make political theatre, but to make theatre political. (after Jean-Luc Godard)<sup>373</sup>*

##### **i. Introduction**

The focus on the collective permeates every aspect of Claudia Bosse's work, from production planning, rehearsals, choice of settings, accompanying theoretical research to the 'staging' itself, which she has described as not a series of images but a series of situations.<sup>374</sup> Her theatre company, Theatercombinat, founded in 1996 and based in Vienna, has a specific political goal: to re-activate the direct link between the experience of participating in a theatrical performance and the experience of participating in a democracy in our contemporary world. Their methodology is described on their website, as 'research into theatrical concepts, pushing theatre beyond its limits in search of new, collective and adventurous ways to communicate with the spectators, the space and the organisation of the public.'<sup>375</sup> Their work combines elements of theatre, installation, choreography and performance and the performances capitalize on the relationship

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<sup>373</sup> Theatercombinat (2000?). The dates in the notes which have a questionmark refer to quotes from Theatercombinat's website, which doesn't provide exact dates. I have used throughout the date of the relevant production.

<sup>374</sup> Bosse (2008?)

<sup>375</sup> Theatercombinat, Chronicle. (n.d.)

between the members of the audience and the action on stage in diverse and dynamic ways. All the accompanying theoretical material resulting from their productions is freely available on line, and so are the videos of the performances. The 'democratic' on-line presence, together with their extensive tours, publications and site-specific city interventions, are all geared towards reaching the widest audience possible.

It is clear that many of the main topics discussed in this thesis, and in this chapter in particular, such as the civic nature of the theatrical experience in ancient Athens and the chorus' link to the concerns of the community, are addressed in an unusually thorough manner in the work of Theatercombinat. Furthermore, the legacies of Brecht's Learning Play and of the 20th century avant-garde experiments with audience participation are also a central part of their cultural legacy. Like the 1960s activist-artists, the company is looking to redefine the audience-performer relationship in a theatre in which the spectator will not be passive, and the art form will be a protest against the status quo.

However, the challenge is greater now that it was in the 60s or even in the 90s postmodernist experiments. Our culture today, a consumerist culture of spectacle, has the ability to automatically absorb, commercialise and make mainstream every attempt to stand apart. Thus it can easily neutralise the art work's true political potential. For example, facets of contemporary culture such as politics, mass entertainment and the media have appropriated the theatrical and many of theatre's conventions, including the participatory aspect. In fact, the theatrical technique of focusing the performance on audience participation is by now almost in danger of becoming predictable, a much used and abused convention itself, which has probably lost its potential to be a subversive political tool. Claudia Bosse's work must therefore be seen in the context of a generation of theatre makers who are searching for new, relevant and profound ways to include political and social issues in theatre performance, by continuing to explore conventions and to unsettle audience expectations. Furthermore, one must consider that Theatercombinat are based in a country famous for its high culture and its tradition in the arts, but also, historically, for its deeply conservative and sometimes extreme right-wing political ideologies, once again coming to the surface now: in the recent 2017 election the conservative Austrian People's Party made a deal with the far-right Freedom Party to form a coalition government.<sup>376</sup> In this environment, in which culture, in the form of

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<sup>376</sup> For an up-to-date database with election results in Europe see Nordsieck, last accessed 8 February 2018.

theatre, opera and of course, music, is a high-end product often disconnected from its social message, we can see why companies such as Theatercombinat and writers such as Thomas Bernhard and Elfriede Jelinek would want to protest society's hypocrisy and create artwork with a direct political message.

In this context, Bosse's and Theatercombinat's defense against contemporary consumerist attitudes and entrenched conservative ideologies is multi-faceted and rigorous. First, much emphasis is put on the accompanying research, theory and ideological foundation, which feels as important as the work itself. This material is shared by all participants and the public through lectures with academics and experts, workshops, open rehearsals, publications, and detailed notes in the performance's programme and on line. Secondly, the degree, scale and quality of audience participation is what makes the work stand out: the company rigorously rehearses for months with the members of the public who want to participate in the performance, doing detailed work on text and movement. For example, in the production of Aeschylus' *Persians* as many as 340 members of the public participated as chorus members, after a three-month long rehearsal period. Furthermore, the interaction between audience and performer is pushed to new limits: Bosse and her team talk about this interaction in terms of 'reciprocal observation' and the audience's 'fear'.<sup>377</sup> The spectator has a civic responsibility to be active, and the participation of ordinary citizens (non-actors) in the performances is one way to reinforce that experience. The lengthy preparation, the immersion in theory, and the high value placed on the precious encounter between professional performers, amateur participants and audience, are aimed at safeguarding against attitudes such as simple voyeurism or cultural tourism, that frequently occur in galleries and performance spaces in the West in recent years.

Several other specific areas of experimentation and focus stand out when observing the performances, such as the use of space, the testing of the audience's and performer's endurance and the attention paid to the process rather than the result. The overarching aim of the work, permeating its every aspect, from conception and rehearsal to final presentation, is to move as far away as possible from the idea of theatre as a commodity and spectator as consumer: the theatrical event is not a form of entertainment but a civic act. To this purpose the rules of consumer art are challenged in areas such as duration (of performance, of rehearsal, of a moment of dramatic action), mainstream

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<sup>377</sup> See Behrens (n.d.) and Bosse (2008?).

expectations of physical appearance, conventional representation, and the communication of meaning through text.

## ii. Greek drama

The political dimension of Claudia Bosse's work that leads her to explore theatre's vital relationship to the community, also explains why her company would naturally gravitate towards Greek drama and Greek myth. Through her work on tragedy, but also other genres, she has dealt with the question what constitutes a **chorus** with often profoundly meaningful results. The degree of community involvement is key to her approach, as her most famous incarnations of the Greek chorus include hundreds of civilians in public spaces that blur the boundaries between the citizen experience and the theatrical performance.

This chapter will focus on the work *MassakerMykene* (1999-2000) and the series *Tragödienproduzenten* (2006-2009), which included a production of Aeschylus' *Persians*.

## iii. Claudia Bosse in her own words

At the 2010 annual APGRD conference under the title Choruses: Ancient and Modern Bosse led a practical workshop on how she creates a chorus for her productions. She explained that her method focuses on the creation of the conditions for an active and diverse group to become a chorus through the constant negotiation between the individual and the collective. In her presentation she contrasted her kind of chorus with clips of the chorus from Busby Berkley's musical *Gold diggers of 1935*, a film which showcases the strict choreography and absolute uniformity of the 1930s, the golden age of musical.<sup>378</sup> Bosse couldn't have found a more complete antithesis for her own work: it became clear that in her view the 1930s chorus is not only irrelevant to contemporary political theatre but also went hand in hand with the rise of fascism in that same period. Bosse is not only challenging standard perceptions of the chorus, a term that for theatre artists and audiences in the West evokes images from the traditional musical, but goes as far as to

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<sup>378</sup> Busby Berkeley was a Hollywood musical choreographer of the 1930s famous for his elaborate choreographies that often included complex geometric formations. Claudia Bosse is particularly interested in the ideological and aesthetic background of Berkeley's work, which was also the inspiration for the choreography of the production of *Coriolanus*, discussed later in this chapter.

say that the uniform chorus of that genre is not a chorus. Instead, Bosse defined the chorus as a process, an event that happens only when the individual is constantly negotiating their place within the ensemble, and so their relationship with the community.

The practical section of the workshop demonstrated that the chorus is a process of listening, of active participation, of working with and exploring the tension between the individual and the group. Even in that short session a pivotal aspect of the work became obvious: in such a large group, the effort required for the simplest action, such as to maintain a common rhythm in recitation, is in itself a demonstration of the conflict between the self and the others, or the established order. Furthermore, Bosse explained that during the performance with an audience a further layer is added: in terms of staging, a large chorus in one of her productions is usually physically mixed with the audience in appropriately organized performance spaces. Thus the audience's reaction to this proximity, the close contact with the chorus of performers, and the relationship that is created during the event, are also part of the process of creating a chorus. The definition of the chorus then encompasses the collective of performers, amateur or professional, as well as the collective of the audience.

#### iv. *MassakerMykene*<sup>379</sup>

From January 1999 to December 2000 Claudia Bosse and her company created *MassakerMykene*, a choral work based on Brecht's *Fatzer-fragment* and Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. The location was the St. Marx Slaughterhouse in Vienna, an area of 22.000 m<sup>2</sup> built around 1880. From October 1999 fifteen presentations of the process were given, lasting between 36 minutes and 24 hours. The final presentation lasted for over 36 hours.<sup>380</sup> The deserted slaughterhouse was located underneath a motorway bridge, thus the noise from the traffic was a constant soundscape and backdrop to the performance. In the production photographs on the Theatercombinat website the industrial space designed for mass slaughter evokes a web of images and associations from contemporary wars and urban life, but also of World War II death camps.

In *MassakerMykene* there were no assigned roles. Instead the group of seven actors alternated between roles and choral lyric, abandoning completely the traditional

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<sup>379</sup> Concept/directed by: Claudia Bosse, Josef Szeiler, performers/collaboration: Markus Keim, Andreas Pronegg, Christine Standfest, Doreen Uhlig, Kristina Zoufaly, clothing: Edwina Hörl, trainer: Wang Dongfeng, Bert Gstettner, Loulou Omer, Sonja Schmidlehner, text advice: Georg Danek.

<sup>380</sup> Theatercombinat (2000?).

idea of playing a character. Anton Bierl notes the unusual use of space and the relationship with the audience that this space created, a relationship also cultivated by open rehearsals:

In *MassakerMykene* [...] there was no stage and no separation of audience and actors. In repetitions that went on for hours and were open to the public, spectators would decide where they wanted to be, if, for instance, they wanted to follow a group of chorus members who were moving away from the others. Bosse and Szeiler turned the whole trilogy into a chorus. [...] They all knew the whole text and individual roles were taken now by one, now by another, who then joined the group again.<sup>381</sup>

Christine Standfest, a member of Theatercombinat and the company's dramaturg, writes about the experience of participating in the chorus in *MassakerMykene* in a way that reveals aspects of the intense emotional experience of such an open and improvisational style of performance, that relies on unpredictability and spontaneity:

In the chorus moments of terror are enacted. [...] In the chorus the individual does not have control of time and space. Every differentiation—for example, the wrong degree of proximity, the wrong spatial relationship—, needs to be heard, every fear, or in general, every difference is manifest in each moment [...] Fear in the face of being alone inside a chorus and fear of being a part of the chorus. If someone understands the chorus as a specific form of communication rather than as an aesthetic means to create an effect, that is, if someone moves away from [the idea] of the chorus as a technical instrument of intensification and synchronisation, [...] then it becomes obvious that the chorus is a burning glass for society's behaviour and its limits.

(Standfest 1998, my translation)<sup>382</sup>

Thus, through the directorial concept and dramaturgy of *Massakermylene*, Theatercombinat began to explore the idea that the process (of rehearsal, of performance), the use of space, the choral dynamic and fear (of the performers, of the audience) are issues that are interlinked and dramaturgical tools that together serve the production's goal. In the *Tragödienproduzenten* series the company would further develop these techniques and would include the collective of the audience in an even more methodical and systematic way.

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<sup>381</sup> Bierl (2016) 276.

<sup>382</sup> Standfest, 1998.



v. *Tragödienproduzenten*<sup>383</sup>

*Tragödienproduzenten* ('Producing Tragedy') was a series of productions of tragedies the company created from 2006 to 2009, based on texts from four different historical periods, representing four key historical moments and their corresponding political systems reflected in their theatrical traditions.<sup>384</sup> The plays were Aeschylus' *Persians*, Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, Racine and Seneca's *Phèdre* and Elfriede Jelinek's *Bambiland*, a 2003 text inspired by the *Persians*.<sup>385</sup> The concept of the chorus was explored in four different ways in the four plays, but the foundation and inspiration for the whole project was the Athenian democratic council of the five hundred:

starting from the ancient model of the democratic 'council of the 500', the 'boule', a model for a chorus of citizens was developed ('be a Persian! Experiment democracy in the chorus of the 500'); the insurrection of plebeian masses was staged as tap-dance intervention in public space ('turn terror into sport', Shakespeare); the rigid control of the French classic was performatively investigated via Racine's *Phèdre*; contemporary tragedy was realised as acoustic-choreographic intervention in public space [in Jelinek's *Bambiland*].<sup>386</sup>

vi. *Persians*

In the *Persians* the focus of the exploration of the chorus was citizen participation. In 2006 the play was performed in Vienna in a 200m long underground tunnel and in Geneva at Théâtre du Grütli, with 12 and 180 citizen chorus members respectively. In 2008 a new production was created for the festival Theaterformen at the National Theatre of Brunswick in Germany. In the Brunswick production the chorus experiment reached its peak: 340 citizens took part in the performance, after three months of rigorous rehearsal on text and choreography.<sup>387</sup> The production was accompanied by a series of public lectures and discussions with international experts on tragedy and Athenian democracy, entitled 'p-bar'. These culminated in a discussion in a public space entitled 'Create your State', in which members of the chorus, artists and scholars discussed the

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<sup>383</sup> videos of all productions in the series *Tragödienproduzenten* are freely available on-line at <https://vimeo.com/theatercombinat>

<sup>384</sup> *Tragödienproduzenten*: a project directed by Claudia Bosse. A series of theatre productions and research. Texts: Aeschylus' *The Persians*, Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, *Phèdre* by Racine and Seneca and Elfriede Jelinek's *Bambiland*. The project was created in cooperation with Gerald Singer and Christine Standfest, as well as Alexander Schellow, Aurelia Burckhardt, Doris Uhlich and international guests.

<sup>385</sup> Theatercombinat (2009?a).

<sup>386</sup> Bosse and Theatercombinat (2009?).

<sup>387</sup> Theatercombinat (2009?b).

experience of creating the *Persians*.<sup>388</sup> The large size of these choruses, along with the fact that they consisted of ordinary citizens, with nothing in their appearance distinguishing them from the audience members, was a turning point for the work of Claudia Bosse. Since then citizen participation in large choruses has become a prominent feature in her work.<sup>389</sup>

In the *Persians* the issue of fear, so important in *MassakerMykene*, comes up again, this time as an exploration of the audience's fear of organised masses.<sup>390</sup> This fear was caused by the removal of the invisible barrier between the spectator and the performer, achieved mostly through the use of space, as in other productions. The crucial difference here was that in the *Persians* this fear was the result of the sheer scale of the chorus. For example, in the Brunswick production the 340 citizens always outnumbered the spectators, as both collectives shared the large stage of the National Theatre and together almost filled every square inch of the cavernous space. This disconcerting confrontation created a series of situations in the staging that were spontaneous and fruitful for performers and spectators. The improvisational elements in the staging (it is impossible to *rehearse* how exactly such a staging will go with a live audience) meant that the diachronic goal that the spectators should become part of the performance-as-an-experience, was achieved in the most fundamental sense. Their presence in the space literally shaped the outcome of events.

The videos of all three versions of the *Persians* are available to watch on line. What is immediately clear by the way they are shot is that the central concern of all three productions was the experience of the audience during the performance. In the following paragraphs I will focus mostly on the Brunswick production, which had the largest chorus and in which the space allowed for impressive mass choreography and interaction with the audience.<sup>391</sup> The video is created by multi-camera capturing, and often there is more than one point on view on screen at the same time.

As in most Theatercombinat's productions there was no set design in the traditional sense. Instead the carefully chosen space, in this case the big stage of a

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<sup>388</sup> Theatercombinat (2009?b).

<sup>389</sup> As in, for example, the current production of Theatercombinat, *Ideal Paradise*, set to premiere in June 2016 (Theatercombinat 2016?).

<sup>390</sup> Theatercombinat (2009?b).

<sup>391</sup> Concept/staging/score: Claudia Bosse, translation: Peter Witzmann/Heiner Müller, Envoy: Jörg Petzold, Atossa: Doris Uhlich, Shade of Dareios: Christine Standfest, Xerxes: Marion Bordat, Chorus Leader: Roland Bedrich, Anne Cathrin Buhtz, Inga Kolbeinsson, Hanna Legatis, Christoph Linder, Oliver Losehand, Christiane Ostermayer, Ilona Christina Schulz, Katja Thiele, Cornelia Windmüller. Premiere 6.06.2008 at Theaterformen festival in Brunswick.

National theatre, was used as a place of meeting between performers and spectators. There was no musical score, but the echoes of the sounds of the huge crowd moving created a powerful soundscape. The rhythmic recitation of the text, that followed a strict pattern and, in the case of the main characters, was accompanied by stylised gestures, is described by the director as a score.<sup>392</sup> The minimal costume design seemed to serve mostly the purpose of distinguishing the professional actors, who performed the main characters, from the huge crowd of chorus and spectators. For example, the Ghost of Dareios (Christine Standfest) was suspended from the ceiling in a harness, and Atossa (Doris Uhlich) used small stilts, that were perhaps a reference to kothornoi. Atossa was also topless, the close proximity to nudity becoming another instance of confrontation between actor and performer and an exploration of fears and boundaries. This treatment of on-stage nudity in effect eliminates its voyeuristic side, which is sometimes part of the audience experience, by focusing on its humanity, its imperfection and fragility.

The choreography and text work resulted in the spectator's experience being shaped by a series of extremes in spatial relationship, point of view, and aural communication: in one moment a spectator was surrounded by a huge and loud crowd, as the chorus of Persians inundated the stage rhythmically reciting the text, and in the next moment he or she was exposed and alone in a part of the room that the chorus had just left; at other times, the spectators became involved in moments of communication that appeared like private, intimate conversations with chorus members, who, significantly, looked just like themselves: the separation between the two groups was in those instances almost imperceptible. The camera angles of the on-line video allow the viewer to observe the powerful confrontations created in these meetings and separations between this chorus and the audience. One particularly powerful moment came when the chorus suddenly and quickly retreated to the periphery of the room with their backs turned to the action, leaving the scattered spectators in the centre, surrounding Atossa who had fallen on the floor.

However, despite the creators' stated emphasis on relationships and encounters, the performance is not without visually stunning moments, such as when hundreds of pieces of paper descend from the ceiling with text for the audience to read; or when the chorus members fall to the ground, gradually, one by one, during the messenger speech,

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<sup>392</sup> This is a common feature in Bosse's work, very prominent for example in the production of *Phédre*, discussed below.

creating the effect that the spectators are standing among a sea of dead bodies on a battlefield. Furthermore, it was clear that the performance was the result of careful and lengthy preparation: the amateur chorus was intense and committed in their delivery, their unison speech impressive on such a scale, while their movement was marked by determination, speed and efficiency despite the large, crowded space. For example, during the evocation of Dareios' ghost the chorus managed to perform several almost-perfectly synchronised jumps that echoed around the walls.

It is clear from all the literature, the production notes, the press documents and the interviews, that the citizens participating in this chorus were participating in a contemporary exploration of direct democracy. This ideological foundation, combined with the novelty of rehearsing and acting in a professional production of such caliber, probably made participating in this chorus a more life-changing experience for the amateur participants, than it would have for professional actors. It remains to ask whether the amateurs' participation was equally relevant and impactful for the audience. Why was it crucial for the spectators that the chorus members were and looked like ordinary citizens like themselves? Perhaps because the scale of this choral work and the community's involvement, in attempting to mirror the social impact of the council of the five hundred, came close to embodying some of the power of the original Greek chorus: the audience could see clearly that these were non-professionals, with voices and bodies just like them, not in costume, not trained theatrically, participating in a play whose plot is structured around a juxtaposition between the people and those in power. This created associations and thought processes in the same way that the ancient chorus could evoke non-dramatic forms, events and activities that constituted emotionally and ideologically charged aspects of community life. Therefore, for the spectator, the central conflict of the play materialized before their eyes in conditions that were as close to a real-life political confrontation as possible: it was really the people talking to the Queen. The removal of the theatrical through the participation of non-professionals became a vital dramaturgical tool in the revival of this play, since the massive amateur chorus enacted the *possibility* of change. The specific political goal of this kind of participatory theatrical experience is seen by Theatercombinat as reversing the process of desensitization of the public, the result of being constantly bombarded with information:

as a spectator, you are never on the outside. the removal of a certain 'eventfulness', the reduction to a special presence combined with the

manner, the duration and also the method of how this martial conflict is narrated, contradict our familiarisation with the experience of perceiving a new war every 30 seconds.<sup>393</sup>

In other words, Bosse is forcing the audience to pay close attention, to closely observe the performers but also themselves within the narrative, thus cultivating empathy—a key ingredient of civilized society.

In the rest of the plays in the *Tragödienproduzenten* series the idea of the chorus continues to be investigated and developed further in each one of them, always with emphasis on its political potential.

### vii. *Coriolanus/Turn Terror Into Sport*

The next play in the series was Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*. Here the large-scale chorus was further explored by drawing a parallel between mass entertainment and military synchronicity. This idea was first put to the test through a *happening*, or public intervention, entitled *Turn terror into sport*, (a quote from Shakespeare's play), which took place at Maria-Theresien-Platz, in the heart of Vienna, on September 15 2007. It was inspired by the work of 1930s choreographer Busby Berkeley<sup>394</sup> and included one hundred citizens participating, with six tap-dance teachers, six actors, and one thousand spectators.<sup>395</sup> *Turn Terror into Sport* was part of the *Coriolanus* production, a project drawing from the Roman historical parallel to focus on contemporary politics and contemporary wars. The actual performances of *Coriolanus*<sup>396</sup> took place from October 17 to November 11 2007 at The Place, a former tram depot, in Vienna and the tap dancing mass-chorus of *Turn Terror Into Sport* was incorporated into the main production.

The play was chosen for its political content, in which the creators saw 'the beginning of democracy in the upcoming Roman Republic.'<sup>397</sup> The idea of collision, political and military, a recurring theme in the production on-line material, was expressed in the staging of the six actors, which at times reached physical extremes. But again it

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<sup>393</sup> Theatercombinat (2009?b).

<sup>394</sup> See above p.171.

<sup>395</sup> Theatercombinat (2007?a).

<sup>396</sup> Direction/concept: Claudia Bosse, *Coriolanus/Volumnia*: Doris Uhlich, *Aufidius/Titus Lartius/Volumnia*: Marie-Eve Mathey-Doret, *Menenius/Volumnia*: Aurelia Burckhardt, *Cominius/Volumnia*: Gerald Singer, *Brutus/Adile/Volumnia*: Christine Standfest, *Sicinius/Herold/Volumnia*: Jennifer Bonn, dramaturgy: Christine Standfest, Space intervention: Karoline Streeruwitz, Christian Teckert, translation: Claudia Bosse/Christine Standfest.

<sup>397</sup> Theatercombinat (2007?b).

was the presence of the mass chorus of amateur citizens and the interaction with the audience that brought home the political message of this work: ‘the insurgency of the street seizes the premises of the palace.’<sup>398</sup>

The technique of eliminating the boundaries between acting space and spectator space was used again, encouraging the element of surprise and unexpected spatial configurations, such as in the case of performers’ entrances and movement.<sup>399</sup> For example, the chorus entered from below, using a long ramp like a ditch on the stage floor. As in the *Persians*, at times the audience seemed outnumbered, because they found themselves scattered around the space, some with their own personal point of view, cut off from the rest of the group.

The chorus this time did not follow the organic, almost improvisational choreographic patterns of the *Persians* chorus. Instead, the idea of strict choreography, as epitomised by tap-dancing in the 1930s musical, was explored as a reflection of the militarisation of the state. Therefore, the presence and role of the people in the play and, consequently, in the running of the state, was further complicated in this performance. If Bosse saw reflections of militarisation and anti-democratic tendencies in the absolute synchronicity and uniformity of the 1930s musical chorus, then the chorus in this play was not just an instrument of democracy—it posed a danger to democracy, as a militarised mob would. Against the current political crisis in Europe, it could also be interpreted as a comment on the rise of populist, extremist movements, that promise empowerment to the masses. But this remained open to interpretation, one of the many unanswered questions that the active spectator would be faced with in *Coriolanus*.

#### viii. *Phédre*

This unrelenting focus on the spectator is also prominent in *Phédre*, a performance based on Seneca’s and Racine’s texts. Here the strict rules of baroque theatre dominated a daring exploration of the effect of speech and movement on the actors’ bodies that included the vocabulary of boxing and performance art. The actors, all but one over 60 years old, performed a physically and vocally demanding score and choreography in the nude. The degree of difficulty of this performance is emphasized by the creators in very evocative terminology (‘bodies deformed by speech’, ‘the bodies tumble into different

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<sup>398</sup> Theatercombinat (2007?b).

disciplines [...] tearing open their skin by speech') and seen as pivotal to the dramaturgy. The violence performed on and by the bodies becomes a metaphor for the sociopolitical issues that are the axis of *Tragodieprozudenten* and integral to the concept of *Phédre*:

Racine (1677) in the ring, Seneca (50) in space – absolutism and the end of the Roman republic. A boxing ring is the venue for the conflicts between state, territory, body, liberty and love.<sup>400</sup>

In Bosse's own words, the rules of French classicism exemplified by Racine were part of the leadership's 'forced control over language and culture as a means of national politics.' These strict rules were followed in performance and taken to their extreme through the *mise-en-scène*'s metaphor of using a boxing ring. In this framework she uses Seneca's text as a 'countercultural commentary' because the Roman text describes 'body images, immoralities, human dismemberments that Racine would never have been allowed to describe.'<sup>401</sup>

Even though in this production there was a clearer spatial separation between audience and performers, the focus was yet again on the spectator:

[A]round a boxing ring groups of spectators are assembled observing each other from 3 different perspectives, following the progression of the Racinian tragedy. This space is crossed by the actors, choreographed, marked by fragments of Seneca's 'Phaedra'.<sup>402</sup>

Therefore, although there was no chorus as such in this production, the spectators are again an integral part of the performance: the polis, through this mutual observation, was present, and so were current and urgent sociopolitical issues.

The location of the performance was the Salle du Faubourg, a community space of the Municipality of Geneva, rented out for events, exhibitions, performances and conferences.<sup>403</sup> The architecture of the space, with its arches and gallery space, has a formality that is evocative of court spectacles and baroque. As in the other productions, the moments before the beginning of the performance were a focal point: the entrance of the audience into the space, their pause and hesitation as they negotiated a point of view,

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<sup>400</sup> Theatercombinat (2008?a).

<sup>401</sup> Theatercombinat (2008?a).

<sup>402</sup> Theatercombinat (2008?a).

<sup>403</sup> Recently, and until July 2015, but after the production of *Phédre*, it also housed about forty asylum seekers.

a place to stand, their search for a clear, sheltered, fixed spatial relationship to the events on stage, were part of the show. It became gradually clear that in this staging it was not possible to have a fixed vantage point. Even when you did find a seat, as it were, and stayed there, you were never ‘safe’ from intense audience-performer interaction. There were no boundaries, and no safe distance, not even in the gallery.

#### **ix. Nudity**

Nudity is one of the many confrontational, unsettling elements that make up this tense relationship with the audience in many of Theatercombinat’s productions and it brings us back to the issue of fear: reciprocal observation is enhanced through the proximity with nude performers, and through the unconventional use of the naked body on stage. In *Phédre*, as the audience entered to go to their seats, they encountered a naked actress already sitting there, while another naked performer was half-visible from a doorway, watching them as they entered. Proximity with these naked bodies would be unavoidable throughout the performance. I already mentioned that in the *Persians* a bare-breasted Atossa on stilts stood out from the huge crowd, sharing the performance space with the audience. The same actress playing Coriolanus removed her clothing in front of the audience and stayed naked for much of the performance. This is not the kind of narcissistic nudity we sometimes see in contemporary performances. These bodies are young and old, and expose at once their power, their frailty and their humanity. They force us to think about the limits of human interaction while at the same time making concrete one of the main concerns of tragedy: the suffering and mortality of the human body: Atossa repeatedly crashes down onto the floor, after the messenger speech, only a few inches away from the closest spectator; the performers’ bodies in *Phédre* are visibly affected by the extremely challenging vocal and physical work; by introducing nudity in the moments of tap-dancing in *Coriolanus*, the body is at once powerful and vulnerable, it’s as if we are reminded of mortality at the moment of the greatest triumph. This focus on corporeality and humanity is part of the process of creating a chorus community consisting of audience and spectators bound together by empathy.

#### **x. *Bambiland*: ‘a chorus-monologue, arguing with me, the citizen’**

In the final play of the series *Tragödienproduzenten*, Elfriede Jelinek’s *Bambiland*, the idea of the tragic chorus is explored through recorded sound, multiplied



by loudspeakers and accompanied by live choreography. The Theatercombinat website describes the performance as: ‘A tragic chorus of 12 loudspeakers.’

#### a. The text

*Bambiland*, by Nobel prize winning novelist, dramatist and theorist Elfriede Jelinek, a radical author sometimes referred to as ‘Austria’s cultural “pain in the ass”’, ‘best-hated author’ and ‘the world’s greatest agitator’<sup>404</sup>, was written in 2003 as a reaction to the third Gulf War, the occupation of Iraq and atrocities committed against prisoners at Abu Ghraib prison. It has been characterized as ‘posthumanist’, as it ‘deconstructs the languages of power and politics that shaped a European “humanism” that today lost its (universal) appeal’.<sup>405</sup> Inspired by Aeschylus’ *Persians*, it is a violent, surreal war report of the invasion of Iraq, written in the form of a monologue but with shifting voices. It reverses the point of view of the *Persians*, as it is told from the subjective, politically incorrect point of view of the invading country: the ‘I’ or the ‘we’ represents, in turn, a Western war reporter, an American soldier, George W. Bush himself, etc. The language of propaganda and violence is interspersed with references to Tomahawk and Cruise missiles, Apache bombers, killings of civilians, to Dick Cheney profiting by the war, to Jesus, to Crusades and to the Abu Ghraib prison torture: words that are familiar, words we heard on the news daily during the Gulf war. A central goal of Jelinek’s text is an indictment of the way war is reported through the media: in our contemporary society every detail, every atrocity, every technical aspect of the artillery, reaches the public as information in a news report. And the coverage of the Gulf War was a turning point for this tendency. The play’s ironic treatment of the Western observer/reporter of the war, obsessed with reporting ‘the truth’, highlights the fact that today the media are the platforms of the dominant political narrative and of the rhetoric used to justify such campaigns, and as such play an key role in forming the public’s concept of the enemy. *Bambiland* has been interpreted in the larger theoretical framework of post-colonialism, as it examines once again the West’s perennial view of the East as the demonized ‘Other’, a world-view that has been instrumental in European self-definition, and reiterated at every historical crisis.<sup>406</sup> The author draws a causal link between the behavior of the audience at home—the citizens of the ‘civilized’, democratic, invading country, who

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<sup>404</sup> Decreus (2011).

<sup>405</sup> Decreus (2011).

<sup>406</sup> See for example Hall (1989).

continue to enjoy the war coverage as entertainment—and the hubristic behavior of leaders such as G.W. Bush. *Bambiland* underlines the surrealism and absurdity of this aspect of our existence, but also our responsibility: the word ‘infotainment’ is used to describe this situation, meaning ‘an attitude that reduces every bit of historical seriousness and turns a public into passive consumers’.<sup>407</sup> This attitude of the audience back home in the West, at the receiving end of the war reports, is the main focus of Theatercombinat’s production:

We, central Europeans, who are absorbing and constantly aroused by pictures and words. we, who are constantly being addressed.<sup>408</sup>

*Bambiland08*<sup>409</sup> was a series of performances of the play in October and November 2008 that took place in various public urban spaces in Vienna.

The performance consisted of one recorded female voice in a four-track recording, played from 12 loudspeakers moved by performers in public spaces, in an interactive composition with the sounds of the city. Sometimes the loudspeakers were pushed on trolleys, at other times they were attached to helmets worn by the performers, or to umpire chairs:

[P]arabolic speakers on trolleys, megaphones attached to helmets, trolleys with tv’s, umpire-chairs as observation posts: tragic choruses of 12 objects each moved from Schwarzenbergplatz via the Donaukanal, the Rennbahnweg housing estates to the Aqua Terra Zoo in a former flakturm of vienna - and from the military exhibition at Heldenplatz to the contemporary art depot of Vienna’s Museum of Applied arts, MAK.<sup>410</sup>

### **b. The staging**

The main metaphors in the *mise-en-scène* were contemporary media coverage of the war, contemporary anti-war protests and science fiction: performers dressed in bunny suits, or at other times wearing ski masks, pushed loudspeakers through city spaces, from

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<sup>407</sup> Decreus (2011).

<sup>408</sup> Theatercombinat (2008?b).

<sup>409</sup> Concept/artistic direction: Claudia Bosse, concept collaboration: Alexander Schellow, Gerald Singer, Christine Standfest, speaker: Anne bennent, performance/lab: Aurelia Burckhardt, Caroline Farke, Oliver Losehand, Alexander Schellow, Dorothea Schürch, Gerald Singer, Christine Standfest, loudspeaker development/sounddesign: Wolfgang Musil, film: Alexander Schellow, object realisation/technical direction: Simon Häfele†.

<sup>410</sup> Theatercombinat (2008?b).

which the recording of Bambiland was heard, mirroring the omnipresence of war report in the urban soundscape that dominates daily life. Capitalist commercial culture, symbolically present through the Disney imagery of the bunny suits, was combined with the disturbing images and sounds of war.

*Bambiland09*<sup>411</sup> followed, a one-off performance on November 7 2009, at the former Ankerbrot Factory in Vienna, described as ‘a concertante indoor-choreography with loudspeaker-carts, moved by a dancing animal chorus.’

In this performance the audience walked freely through the freezing cold space, many of them wearing emergency thermal blankets, as there was again no assigned audience area or spatial separation from the performers. The chorus was again dressed in bunny suits, and the movement included a choreography with body bags. The distance and movement of the performers pushing the loudspeakers created the sound composition in the cavernous space.

Therefore, in a reversal of the tragic form, in *Bambiland08* and *Bambiland09* the audience is the actor in dialogue with the chorus. Even though the text is in fact a monologue for the chorus, the form and locations of the performance invite interaction. The collective of the audience is even included in the visual world of the performance, through the thermal blankets that work as costumes and fit in with the imagery of body-bags worn by the performers. On the other hand, the absence of text for the actor, which is in this case, the audience, further emphasises the allusion to contemporary citizens’ passivity as they are bombarded with a constant stream of information.

## **xi. Conclusions**

In the production notes of Theatercombinat’s *Coriolanus* we read:

in this play from Shakespeare, the people turns into an agent of history  
[...] the spectators become part of the battles and the political power  
struggles.

This is, in short, the common goal in all of Theatercombinat’s productions discussed here. In contemporary Western democratic societies the people, the electoral body, are increasingly disconnected from the political processes. Through an essential participation

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<sup>411</sup> Choreography/speech composition: Claudia Bosse, speaker: Anne Bennent, director of sound/speaker development: Wolfgang Musil, assistant director: Dieter Nicka, Technical direction: Marco Tölzer, costumes: Christina Romirer.

in the theatrical event, a truly profound audience experience, Theatercombinat aim to re-activate the individual's connection to the community and to political life. We can analyse the methodology used in their productions into two distinct techniques: creating an active spectator, who observes while being observed and who is forced to think about the here and now rather than an imaginary world; and creating large choruses of citizens who interact with the material through their own personal responsiveness to the current socio-political context (*Persians*, *Create your State*). The chorus thus transcends the boundaries of theatre to encompass all the citizens, creating political and social awareness. This chorus has a lot in common with the original Greek chorus. The commonalities emerge mostly in relation to the process of creating the performance, rather than the finished product and are intrinsic to the company's ideology. First of all, bringing the performances to public spaces (*Turn Terror Into Sport*, *Bambiland08*) recreates aspects of the spatial relationships the ancient Athenian theatre, which, as it has been frequently noted, had more in common with contemporary spaces of public assembly, than with contemporary conventional theatre spaces, since there everyone was visible and a large number of the citizenry could be accommodated.<sup>412</sup> Exploring the relationship between bodies, groups, choreography and political dynamic in an empirical way (*Coriolanus*, *Persians*) brings to mind the relationship between dance training, military training, public acts of worship or celebration, community life and the performance in a tragic chorus, so crucial for understanding the Athenian chorus' dynamic and cultural context. Defining the audience-performer relationship as a confrontation and the issue of fear that results from this confrontation and from the interaction between the individual and the group is a recurring theme in the production notes and interviews (*MassakerMykene*, *Phédre*, *Persians* etc.) Similarly, in the ancient theatre, under the light of the sun, everyone and everything was visible, including the political, military and religious leaders in the front row, while the plays themselves were often openly referring to current collective traumas. Furthermore, the theatrical conventions of representation and spectacle were still something fresh and unprecedented. Theatercombinat's preoccupation with fear may be one way of re-creating this 'freshness' and immediacy of the original performance of Greek drama.

To these goals for a more 'democratic' theatrical experience that will cultivate active spectators we can add the company's focus on process, manifest in their preference

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<sup>412</sup> See for example Liapis, Panayiotakis and Harrison (2013) 9-10.

for open rehearsals, long periods of preparation, and detailed production notes available to everyone. The resulting performance does not have a polished, finished look, but continues to be part of this on-going process, and to evolve when the audience enters as a catalyst. This emphasis on process also creates a new aesthetics: the mixture of actors with citizens, the removal of representation/mimesis and its replacement by experience, the removal of theatre design in the traditional sense, the scale of the spaces used, and, finally, the scale of the chorus, are all elements that expand the boundaries of contemporary theatre practice.

Why Claudia Bosse and her company would gravitate towards Greek drama and the great political tragedies of the Renaissance is clear. But in a discussion of political theatre, we may ask if their goal, shared by many artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to activate the political consciousness of the citizens through theatre, has been achieved.

Due to the changes in the global political landscape the artists of the 21st century face new challenges. The anti-establishment drive behind such political productions can be deflated without a specific ideological system to look up to. If the 20th century was a century of revolution, the 21st century so far has been a century of disillusionment. Technology and the dissemination of information have played a big part in this, and so has the absence of a viable alternative to capitalism.

The work of Claudia Bosse is targeting all these phenomena, by using contemporary media and technology in subversive ways, such as in *Bambiland*; by reacting to audience complaisance, removing the safe distance, as in the *Persians*, and thus reflecting on how we have become anaesthetised by ‘perceiving a new war every 30 seconds’;<sup>413</sup> by pushing the limits of audience participation; by sharing information, theory and knowledge; by challenging consumerist demands about how we receive information, effectively trying to force us to pause and think; by revitalising, through theatre, the potential of living in a community; this is art as political manifesto, based on the legacy of Brecht and the legacy of Greek tragedy, but with new aesthetics.

Can a member of the audience emerge from one of their productions having been changed? The goal is presumably a more civilised society, characterized by empathy, in which citizens pay more attention to the world around them, and in which they pause to think. Whether this has or can be achieved on any scale must remain an open question. Perhaps, in the void left by the collapse of ideologies, Theatercombinat is proposing we

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<sup>413</sup> See above, p.177.

turn to the power of the community. In a recent post on the company's Facebook page, among open calls for citizen participants to their latest big chorus, we read:

we are deeply disturbed and worried about the today's presidential pre-elections in Austria. if there are propositions to organize please contact us. We believe in an open plurycultural society and disagree with any kind of racism or fascism.<sup>414</sup>

(Theatercombinat Facebook community, 24 April 2016)

## 5. The young Chalkidean wives in a proposed revival of Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis*

Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis* is a play which in recent years has been frequently revived with emphasis on its powerful political themes,<sup>415</sup> but which also features a notoriously problematic chorus. Euripides' subversive re-telling of the famous Iphigenia myth is the basis of a proposed contemporary revival which I would like to discuss here. Focusing in particular the behaviour of the chorus, we will consider a proposed directorial concept with an anti-war message, foregrounding the theme of the construction of *collective memory* in the service of civic ideology. This reading has the potential to activate the enigmatic, distanced chorus and explore whether it can in fact be at the centre of the play's main discourse.

### i. Constructed Memory, propaganda and deception

A renewed interest in this play from practitioners who want to stress its critique on current politics and its anti-war message, is in keeping with recent scholarship interpreting the play as an indictment of war and chauvinism.<sup>416</sup> The dramatized conflict on whether Iphigenia's sacrifice should take place is an opportunity to take apart the real motivations behind the Trojan war and thus its moral validity, in a discussion that includes the themes of good government, corrupt authority, democracy, leadership, morality and honesty. In this hermeneutic context, which also takes into account the historical moment

<sup>414</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/theatercombinat/?fref=ts>

<sup>415</sup> See for example Hall (2005).

<sup>416</sup> For the play's performance history see Hall (2005). On the disagreement among scholars on the play's meaning and message see Sorum (1992) and Markantonatos (2012).

when *IA* was produced,<sup>417</sup> Iphigenia's famous volte face speech in lines 1368 ff is seen as highly ironic and with chauvinist content: the barbarians are slaves, the Greeks are free, the value of a woman's life is nothing compared to a man's, Troy, which she previously didn't know anything about (662: ποῦ τοὺς Φρύγας λέγουσιν ὀκίσθαι, πάτερ;/ Where do men say the Phrygians live, father?),<sup>418</sup> should be conquered at all costs. Furthermore, as Sorum notes, 'in the dramatic fiction nothing substantiates her argument—and nothing in the mythological future accords with her intentions.'<sup>419</sup> Hall has characterised the argument for the validity of the war and Iphigenia's sacrifice in this play an example of spin-doctoring,<sup>420</sup> a word that entered contemporary politics in recent years, around the time of the second invasion of Iraq. Iphigenia's patriotic speech puts the ultimate spin on the truth. Spin-doctoring shapes popular opinion through distortion of the truth, essentially through the manipulation of memory: historical memory is erased and new collective memory is constructed.

The language of memory and the debate on historical accuracy is a strong theme in all the debates among the main characters. In the first epeisodion Agamemnon and Menelaus offer opposing versions behind the reasons for the Trojan War. The official line that this is a campaign to save Greece, most memorably expressed by Iphigenia in the volte-face speech, gradually in the course of the play replaces a commonly held view, related by Agamemnon in the prologue, that this is happening because of Helen's abduction and a pact that the suitors made with Tyndareus. But even here the roots of this war are referred to with a language that may undermine their truth: the arrival of Paris at Sparta, that sparked the series of events that eventually brought the assembled army here to Aulis, is 'ὥς ὁ μῦθος Ἀργείων ἔχει' (Argive legend says) (72): a solid fact or is it another mythological story? Menelaus' counterargument in the first epeisodion is that this campaign is meant to protect Greece (*Hellas*) from barbarians (370-5 and again 410). Agamemnon rejects this line of reasoning with a palpably sarcastic tone, putting forth the adultery of Helen and Menelaus' inability to control his marriage bed as the main reason

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<sup>417</sup> On the anti-war message and the historical context see Blume (2012), who argues that the play shows inept political leadership in view of catastrophic developments in the Peloponnesian War. Sorum (1992) characterizes Iphigenia's reiteration of the patriotic narrative that justifies the sacrifice as a 'fantasy' (541). Siegel (1980) sees in *IA* a deconstruction of the idea of heroism and specifically in the volte face speech a youthful mind affected by overwhelming pressure (311). Blume (2012) views the volte face speech as 'chauvinistic' (183).

<sup>418</sup> The translation of all excerpts from *Iphigenia in Aulis* in this chapter are by E.P. Coleridge.

<sup>419</sup> Sorum (1992) 54.

<sup>420</sup> Hall (2005) 21-22.

behind the campaign (380-4), as well as the oath of the suitors, whom he calls κακόφρονες (foolish) and φιλόγαμοι (full of lust) (390-1). During their confrontation Menelaus had also put forth another argument: this war is happening so that Agamemnon can gain political power (355). Clytemnestra's version of the events also agrees with this interpretation of the 'historical truth' behind the Trojan campaign: her husband's political ambition is behind this war (1146-1208). Thus, as early as the first epeisodion, historical truth is presented as elusive and memory as subjective and malleable.

Later on, at one of the most emotionally charged moments in the play, Iphigenia accuses her father of having forgotten the promises they had made between them and now wants to kill her.

τούτων ἐγὼ μὲν τῶν λόγων μνήμην ἔχω,  
σὺ δ' ἐπιέλησαι, καί μ' ἀποκτεῖναι θέλεις. (1231-2)

I remember all we said, it is you who have forgotten and now  
would take my life.

The strong theme of deception contributes to the sense that in this play the 'official version' of historical truth is always changing to suit the current status quo. The theme of deception is expressed through a range of vocabulary, symbols and metaphors. It is introduced in the prologue with the mendacious letter (δέλτος), as the Old Servant describes in detail Agamemnon's writing and re-writing, the breaking of the seal and starting over. Agamemnon repeatedly refers to his own deceptive schemes, using the word σοφίσματα (scheming, plotting), as in 445 and 744 and once the evocative word κρυπτά (1140). Odysseus, a character that does not appear in the play but seems to play an important role in the outcome of events, is mentioned as someone who will plot against the Argive brothers to turn the army against them, using his guile and meddlesome tactics (526). Similarly, Calchas, far from a venerable figure of religious authority, is someone whom the Argive brothers accuse of abusing his authority for personal gain, presumably by making false prophecies. (520-21.)

The emphasis on δέλτος, the writing tablet, on deception and on the truth of traditional stories is of course a variation of a favourite Euripidean theme, the challenge



to canonized tradition,<sup>421</sup> explored in many plays but closely interwoven in this text with the theme of personal and collective memory.

ii. **The contemporary context of a proposed revival**

In our proposed staging of *IA*, we find a parallel between our own reaction to instances in the play's contemporary reception that interpret it through a didactic, nationalistic prism and Euripides' reaction to the mainstream idea that a girl's sacrifice and the ensuing campaign were examples of acts of bravery and patriotism.

More specifically, in contemporary Greece and Cyprus, where our proposed revival is to take place, connotations of Christian and patriotic sacrifice have had a lasting impact on the reception of the Iphigenia myth for the audience. The play is part of the Greek and Cypriot high school curriculum, presumably for its morally edifying content, as evidenced by this excerpt from its synopsis in current handbooks of the history of Ancient Greek literature, emphasizing Iphigenia's heroism for the common good:

Iphigenia, who realizes that the Greek campaign is not a personal matter but an issue of the common good, gives a heroic solution: she goes willingly and fearlessly to her death for the salvation of Greece.<sup>422</sup>  
(My translation)

The school-book interpretation, which is effectively the definitive interpretation for the majority of our audience members, is a contemporary parallel to Euripides' *deltos* used as an instrument of civic ideology and propaganda, brought under scrutiny repeatedly in *IA*. In the same vein, culturally influential revivals of the play, such as the National Theatre of Greece's 1957 production directed by Costis Michaelides with Anna Synodinou in the title role, which also toured abroad,<sup>423</sup> created connotations of patriotic duty and Christian martyrdom, at a time when conservative patriotism dominated the political sphere in modern Greece, with Greek tragedy revivals as one of the establishment's main instruments of propaganda.<sup>424</sup> (See Figure 3).

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<sup>421</sup> On Euripides' interaction with the accepted version of the myth in his plots see Zeitlin (1980), Sorum (1992) and Foley (1985).

<sup>422</sup> Stéfios, Stergioulis and Charitidou.

<sup>423</sup> The production was presented at the 1958 international theatre festival Théâtre des Nations at the Sarah-Bernhardt theatre (now Théâtre de la Ville) in Paris.

<sup>424</sup> For the connection between Modern Greek conservative nationalism and revivals of Greek drama in the 20<sup>th</sup> century see Van Steen (2000) and Ioannidou (2010).



*Figure 3: Anna Synodinou as Iphigenia in Aulis, 15/06/1957. Photo: Harissiadis, D.A. National Theatre of Greece archive.*

The experience of watching this performance became part of collective memory, cultivated further by related imagery such as this famous photograph of Anna Synodinou, frequently reproduced and by now an iconic element in the mosaic of collective memory of the Iphigenia myth.<sup>425</sup>

Cacoyiannis' well-known 1977 film,<sup>426</sup> although it broke with contemporary tradition since it contained a clear anti-war message, was nonetheless in some instances marketed in a way consistent with the 'patriotic' interpretation: the caption on the video cassette cover art reads: 'To save the lives of thousands, he must sacrifice the most precious of all.' (See figure 4). In both cases mentioned aesthetic choices such as the costuming, e.g. the big wreath evoking imagery of Christ's passion, influence the audience's reception through a web of connotations.



*Figure 4: Video cassette cover art of Iphigenia, a film by Michael Cacoyiannis, 1977. Copyright: possibly Columbia Pictures.*

<sup>425</sup> Reviews of the time in Greece and abroad focus on Synodinou's performance and on Iphigenia's heroism, bravery and patriotism. See for example Perseus Athenaios (1958), Lemarchand (1958).

<sup>426</sup> Scholarship on Cacoyiannis' film: Macdonald (1991), Gamel (2015). On the historical and political context of Cacoyiannis' film see especially Michelakis (2013) 143-144 and Bakogianni (2013).

In our production, by creating a dialectic relationship with this patriotic trope that dominated the play's reception for decades, in a similar way to Euripides' response to the *Oresteia* and to established myth, we hope to achieve Sidiropoulou's definition of a contemporary reading of this ancient text: 'an understanding and unfolding of the principal dialectic that the source text is perceived to have displayed at the moment when it was born; subsequently, it is a reading which heightens the correspondence between the tensions and imperatives of the Greek dramatists and the anxieties and needs of the modern spectator.'<sup>427</sup>

### iii. The chorus

The young women of the chorus in this play, in terms of dramatic identity, involvement in the plot and relationship to the place and the characters, are an enigma. By any rule of traditional Greek society, they shouldn't be in this military camp unaccompanied. Euripides could have made the women from Chalkis come to the Artemision to do rituals, but instead their stated goal in being in Aulis is primarily to ogle at the assembled young warriors (171). They have no blood ties or political affiliation with the protagonists, nor are they socially dependent on them. Agamemnon addresses them as 'foreign women' (ξένοι, 542) and early on in the play their foreignness, at least to the Argive royal family, is given as the reason for their emotional distance: following Agamemnon's orders they don't reveal his plans to Clytemnestra and Iphigenia at a crucial moment (604-606). Furthermore, the plot does not seem to affect them in any way: they don't just 'survive' the events, as is the case with many choruses, but, rather, it seems that they were not invested in the outcome in the first place. It would then seem appropriate that in the course of the play they appear increasingly marginalized: after their third stasimon (1036-1097), and until the short choral passage at the end, (1510-31), choral song is completely absent and choral intervention minimal.<sup>428</sup> Their opinions are often lukewarm and even inconsistent: for example, although they don't agree with the sacrifice, as events reach a climax and Iphigenia is about to be led away to be sacrificed,

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<sup>427</sup> Sidiropoulou (2014a) 15.

<sup>428</sup> For an argument against the generalisation that such a marginalisation is due to the chorus' decline in form and function in late tragedy see Foley (2003) (above pp. 155-158) and Weiss, who notes that 'Choral song takes up 20 percent of the total number of lines of the *IA* (21 percent including recitative) and 24 percent of the *Bacchae*, but averages 13 percent for Euripides' surviving earlier tragedies.' (Weiss 2014: 120)

they sing a celebratory paean. Are we then to view them as an apolitical chorus, similar to the chorus of *Phoenissae* or *Ion*, who visit Delphi for reasons of religious *theoria*?

It has been noted that the chorus doesn't necessarily follow the rules of psychological realism in theatre, and thus choral behavior may seem inconsistent from one ode to the next, what Goldhill calls 'the shifting voice'.<sup>429</sup> However, as a practitioner, I believe that within a story-line such as that of *IA*, focusing sharply on human relationships, human decisions, and human motivation, the trajectory of the choral collective in live performance is in fact most likely to be interpreted through the prism of human psychology by the audience, and thus we should attempt to find a logical through-line in their behavior, with wider dramaturgical significance.<sup>430</sup> Through an analysis of their motives and thought processes, especially with regard to their relationship to the assembled army and its leaders, we aim to show that their behaviour may be indicative of a larger political crisis under way in *IA*, and thus dramaturgically significant.

The parodos is an example of the construction of memory in this play, perhaps one of the most striking. Their entrance after the tense prologue injects lightness, frivolity and a flirtatious mood to the military setting. Perhaps there is a comic undertone in the employment of the well-known narrative technique of *teichoscopia*, the viewing-from the walls, the most famous example of which is performed by Helen in the third book of the *Iliad*. But *teichoscopia* is subverted here: there is no urgency or investment in the outcome of the war or personal interest in the soldiers— the motive of the women is purely visual pleasure— therefore, it is almost like a parody.<sup>431</sup>

But most remarkably, the closing lines of the parodos seem to undermine most of what has been said:

ἐνθάδ' οἷον εἰδόμεν  
 νάιον πόρευμα,  
 τὰ δὲ κατ' οἴκους κλύουσα συγκλήτου  
 μνήμην σφάζομαι στρατεύματος. (299-302)

So they did not actually see everything they have described: perhaps they saw something on the beach, the gathered fleet (νάιον πόρευμα), but they have heard about the rest, the

<sup>429</sup> Goldhill (2007) 78.

<sup>430</sup> In this respect I agree with Hall that the audience during a performance, rather than taking into consideration complicated literary or other theories for the analysis of a particular play, is more likely to identify psychologically with actors on stage, through the process of substitution. (Hall 2010:17).

<sup>431</sup> Scodel (1997) 7.

gathered army (συγκλήτου στρατεύματος) which they described in such detail, at home (τὰ δὲ κατ' οἴκους κλύουσα) and believed it, 'saved' it in their memory (μνήμην σφύζομαι). Or perhaps they saw what they had expected to see, having acquired preconceptions about it through tradition or through information they received from persons of higher status, such as their husbands. The important themes of memory and tradition are introduced here, along with implications about our ability to discern what is true and what is a lie, a myth, or just hearsay.

It is also possible that Euripides may have been thinking also of a recent incident from the play's historical context. *IA* was written in the period between 408 and 406, a crucial time for the Peloponnesian war. But in 407 something momentous happened: Alcibiades returned to Athens and was reinstated as general. Maybe then the excited group of women is meant to allude to the large crowd of Athenians gathered at the harbour to welcome him. According to Xenophon's description, the excited crowd desired to see the famous Alcibiades, most of them forgetting the disastrous Sicilian expedition and his defection to Sparta and to Persia, and making various excuses for his actions, such as that he had been plotted against by those with less power whereas he had always advanced the common good. (Xenophon's *Hell.* 1.4. 13)

Perhaps Euripides in the parodos and in lines 590-97, when the arrival of Clytemnestra and Iphigenia is greeted with joyful exclamations, hints at his contemporaries' behaviour, who view their leaders mostly as glamorous celebrities and make their political decisions with a mixture of frivolity, amnesia and apathy.

The first stasimon (543-89), after a vicious fight between Menelaus and Agamemnon that includes accusations of bad leadership (350-376) and erotic infatuation (382), the women reflect on the destructive power of lust and on the necessity of virtue, modesty and wisdom, in both men and women (especially lines 558-572). This is not surprising, given the shocking tone of the confrontation between the two leaders, who drag each other through the mud, creating serious doubts about their fitness to lead this campaign, both in the eyes of the young Chalkidean wives but also in the eyes of the audience. Their initial jubilation is replaced by a fearful mood, but perhaps the most striking change in their psychology with regard to the sensual parodos, which was filled with visual *hedone* (234) at watching the young men, is the rejection of *eros* altogether.

But it is the second stasimon that the chorus voice the most memorable and direct challenges to tradition, established myth and the status quo. Their inner conflict between

what they have been taught and what they are witnessing seems to become sharper, while their essential disagreement not only with the impending sacrifice but with the campaign itself begins to take form. This is effected by the exploration of the themes of how history is told, and the theme of memory itself. In lines 783-792 they begin to realize that the heroes they had admired and eroticized in the parodos are gearing up to commit terrible atrocities at Troy, against women like themselves. These ten lines in which they imagine the fate of the Trojan women are much more than a passing comment: contemporary *mise-en-scène* could take this opportunity to emphasize this remarkable meta-theatrical moment in which the chorus transcends time and place to powerfully evoke Euripides' *Trojan Women* 187-190 and *Hecuba* 923-932. Even though so far the Chalkidean wives have carefully avoided to identify themselves with the fate of the Argive 'foreign women' in this ode they practically become the chorus of Trojan female prisoners: there are great similarities in the language and themes in these three passages, such as the emphasis on the women's hair (*IA* 790, *Hec* 923), on being dragged away by soldiers (*IA* 791, *TW* 189) and on the question of who (τίς) will be the Greek to lead the women into slavery. The impact of this second stasimon of *IA* on the original audience must have been significantly enhanced by the activation of memories of watching the other two plays—both their individual and collective memory. Thus the narrative of a heroic campaign put forth by the protagonists in *IA* can be easily subverted by 'bringing back' the memories of earlier dramatizations of this dramatic plot's future, i.e. the Trojan campaign's aftermath. By transcending a linear conception of time, the chorus reveal the cracks in the established nationalist narrative: instead of a story of glory and self-sacrifice for the common good, it suddenly becomes a story of atrocities committed at war. According to some scholars, this play may have also (painfully) brought to mind the Peloponnesian war, especially since an Athenian defeat was by then a real possibility.<sup>432</sup> This choral ode concludes with an explicit challenge of traditional collective knowledge that is passed down through the generations and supports the civic ideology: in lines 794-800 the chorus wonder whether the myths they have been taught concerning Helen's parentage are true or fables (μῦθοι) transmitted down to them changed over time:

εἰ δὴ φάτις ἔτυμος ὥς  
 ἔτυχεν, Λήδα ὄρνιθι παμένην  
 Διὸς ὅτ' ἠλλάχθη δέμας, εἴτ'

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<sup>432</sup> See Blume (2012) 182.

ἐν δέλτοις Πιερίσιν  
 μῦθοι τάδ' ἐς ἀνθρώπους  
 ἤνεγκαν παρὰ καιρὸν ἄλλως.

if indeed it is a true report that Leda bore you to a winged bird, when Zeus transformed himself there, or whether, in the tablets of the poets, fables have carried these tales to men's ears idly, out of season.

Thus the Euripidean theme of questioning inherited wisdom is once more expressed in relation to cognitive issues, prominent in the recurring themes of knowledge, understanding and memory in the text. The theme of deception resurfaces through the use of the word δέλτοις, the same word used for the deceptive letter in the prologue, and the theme of memory and what makes it reliable is further elaborated.

In the third stasimon the deconstruction of mainstream ideology goes a step further, with the questioning of religion itself and man's relationship with a divine authority. The ode begins by juxtaposing Peleus' wedding and Iphigenia's horrific fate, thus presenting the human sacrifice as perverted nuptials.<sup>433</sup> After the contemplation of such a horrific deed, current moral values and ethics as well as the relationship between gods and humans are brought into question in lines 1090-97.<sup>434</sup> This passage reveals the young women to be very pessimistic about finding justice in human law, but at the same time in a very rebellious mood against the oppression of the gods:

ποῦ τὸ τᾶς Αἰδοῦς  
 ἢ τὸ τᾶς Ἀρετᾶς ἔχει  
 σθένειν τι πρόσωπον,  
 ὅποτε τὸ μὲν ἄσεπτον ἔχει  
 δύνασιν, ἃ δ' Ἀρετὰ κατόπι-  
 σθεν θνατοῖς ἀμελεῖται,  
 Ἀνομία δὲ νόμων κρατεῖ,  
 καὶ μὴ κοινὸς ἀγὼν βροτοῖς  
 μή τις θεῶν φθόνος ἔλθῃ;

Where now does the face of modesty or virtue have any strength? seeing that godlessness holds sway, and virtue is neglected by men and thrust behind them, lawlessness over law prevailing, and mortals no longer making common cause to keep the jealousy of gods from reaching them.

<sup>433</sup> On the ritual identification between marriage and sacrifice see for example Loraux (1991) 37-38 and Foley (1982).

<sup>434</sup> On the undermining of the divine element in the play see also Blume (2012) 186.



This very poignant third stasimon, which undermines the basic pillars of the belief system in the status quo, is followed by a long absence of choral lyric in the play, the result of a series of disillusionments and losses in terms of their allegiance and their beliefs. Thus, along with the loss or undermining of memory, the traditional bonds that connect society, such as belief in divine justice and unifying social causes and affiliations, seem to be collapsing, causing in turn the collective of the female chorus to be gradually silenced.

After more than 400 verses the chorus sing their final song, (1510-31), whose authenticity has been contested and which comes after a long choral silence and two lyric passages sung by Iphigenia.<sup>435</sup> These lines may provide further room for the exploration of the chorus' relationship to the female protagonists and the political situation as a whole. Whereas in tragedy the typical choice at this point would have been a lament, the chorus sing a battle paean, at Iphigenia's bidding. Weiss has argued that here we have a dynamic return of choreia after a long silence, rather a final marginalization of these women. If we agree with scholars who support this passage's authenticity and especially with Weiss, that the monody and the choral passage are thematically, emotionally and musically interconnected and thus were both part of the first performance, this chorus is an unprecedented show of solidarity to Iphigenia that marks a great change in the chorus' attitude from the beginning of the play, where they did not show much sympathy for the female protagonists. Their focus, interest and emotional investment has clearly shifted from the assembled army to Iphigenia's character. Nonetheless, if our proposed revival of this chorus insists on finding the moral and emotional justification for their behaviour and the consistency in their motivation, this battle paean after the contemplation of the horrors of war could still be problematic. It is possible that their motivation is purely to give courage to Iphigenia, to lift her spirit and to ease her final exit, by vocally celebrating her bravery. They obey her bidding to sing a paean, instead of a lament, to give her a celebratory farewell. This does not mean that they believe in the militaristic tone and content of her own words, since early on in the play, when welcoming Clytemnestra and Iphigenia (599-607) they demonstrated their ability to conceal important facts as well as their true emotions. The other possibility is that their behavior is the result of fear: after their realization of the pervasive threat of violence in Aulis and that Ἀνομία δὲ νόμων κρατεῖ (195) they make a show of endorsing militarism and civic ideology: through fear

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<sup>435</sup> On the problem of authenticity of the final sequence of *IA* see for example Weiss (2014) and Kovacs (2003).

or disillusionment they are distanced, silenced, unable to take action and their dynamism is curbed. A third possibility is a demonstration of historical amnesia at work: through the chorus' behaviour Euripides may be showing us how quickly in the course of the play the collective has accepted that a criminal act at the outset of a morally dubious campaign is the ultimate symbol of patriotism. In this case, instead of a transformation in their character with relation to the parodos, in the exodos we could be seeing a return to their superficiality, frivolity and lack of memory.

In any case, the battle paeon sung by these young women, which transforms the horror of Iphigenia's slaughter to the traditional, canonized narrative of necessity and bravery must be imbued with irony, in the finale of this anti-war play.

In this reading, the behaviour of the collective on stage, even when silent, is of crucial importance. They become a central part of the *mise-en-scène*, precisely because the silencing of their dissenting voices, the disintegration of their ideological stamina and their political disorientation are all crucial components of political corruption and bad governance. Finally, their presence, through characterization, on-stage action, costuming etc, can also be a way to enhance the production's goal to react against the didactic, nationalistic version of the myth that was dominant in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## 6. Conclusion

This chapter discussed ways of creating a contemporary yet dynamic and vital chorus that draws inspiration from the original political context and content of the Greek tragic chorus. The 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century directors discussed here all share avant-garde and political tendencies in their work. Their experimentations with the Greek chorus have been the source of progress and innovation both in the history of revivals of tragedy and in the academic field of classical reception. Ideologically, the legacy of these contemporary innovators is a strong feeling of doubt in the soundness of our political system. We could argue that this is when we are closest to the original spirit of tragedy, since part of that spirit was to introduce uncertainty in the triumphant edifice of the democratic polis.<sup>436</sup>

The subject of political adaptations of the Greek chorus is by nature inexhaustible. At the time of completing this chapter, the theatre production *Queens of Syria*<sup>437</sup>, an

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<sup>436</sup> See Hall (2014) 127-157 on the Athenian desire for questioning, which may be the most important part of its legacy to our contemporary civilization.

<sup>437</sup> The official website of the project: <http://www.syriatrojanwomen.org>

adaptation of Euripides' *Trojan Women*, is set to begin its UK tour (July 2016). This is a play in which the chorus of women is the protagonist. In this production the cast consists of fifteen Syrian refugees who have never acted before but who feel that they have survived an experience very similar to that of the Trojan women. On stage they will tell of their own tragedies, their own narratives colliding with Euripides' telling of the Trojan war aftermath.<sup>438</sup> The production, which started as therapeutic theatre workshops and an advocacy project for the Syrian refugees, is now touring the world, while the refugee crisis continues to be one of the biggest challenges Europe has faced since the middle of the 20th century. Here the aesthetic result is not more important than the political context. The impact of this process on the performers themselves as well as the focus on the political context take precedence over the aesthetic experience/result for the audience. In this respect *Queens of Syria* shares some similarities with the Theatre of War project, by the company Outside the Wire, which brings readings of Sophocles' plays *Ajax* and *Philoctetes* to military communities affected by psychological injuries, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, after deployment in Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>439</sup>

But although these projects are a testament to the power of Greek drama, this thesis would rather engage with professional artists who push aesthetic boundaries as they continue to create art despite or because of political crises, harsh economic realities and social upheavals. Instead of focusing on theatre practice as therapy in the narrow sense, these artists view theatre as a therapeutic and necessary part of society in the widest sense: as an inextricable part of a healthy democratic state.

In the following chapter I will examine the impact of the current economic crisis on how theatre artists produce and stage the chorus. The new financial realities in Greece have changed the landscape and rules of theatre practice, even in the case of Greek tragedy, which has until now been monopolised by big-budget state theatres. Currently a new generation of theatre makers are turning their attention to Greek drama despite adverse conditions, marking a turning point in the history of revivals.

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<sup>438</sup> *Queens of Syria*, a collaboration between Developing Artists and Refuge Productions. For more information about the production see Tran (2016).

<sup>439</sup> Outside the Wire according to their website is a social impact company that uses theatre and a variety of other media to address pressing public health and social issues, such as combat-related psychological injury, end of life care, prison reform, political violence and torture, domestic violence, and the de-stigmatization of the treatment of substance abuse and addiction.  
(<http://www.outsidethewirellc.com/about/mission>)

## CHAPTER 6

### THE ECONOMIC CRISIS CHORUS: RETHINKING THE CONNECTION TO THE ROOTS AND THE ETHICS OF THEATRE PRODUCTION

#### 1. Introduction

In the previous chapter I discussed the exemplary approach of Claudia Bosse and her company in revitalizing the dynamic of the choral collective in Greek drama. Along with the innovative and experimental nature of their work, one of the most impressive aspects of their productions is their scale and the interaction with the community. Vital to the quality and reach of their work is the fact that they receive economic support from the state and other donors, through collaborations with institutions and funding bodies that enable this scale of production.<sup>440</sup>

However, the current economic reality of theatre production in most countries means that not everyone can acquire the funds, particularly from the state, to create a large Greek chorus—even when using amateurs. Using amateur actors in a performance is not necessarily cost-free: when Bosse creates large choruses of citizens she rehearses with them over long periods of time and also creates educational sidebar events: this has a significant cost in terms of production. While we praise her rigorous approach, we must remember that only a handful of directors in the world today could get the financial backing to create non-commercial, research-based, experimental productions of Greek drama on such a large scale.

The chorus has always been an economic issue.<sup>441</sup> This dimension of the chorus problem needs to be addressed in this thesis, especially since during the course of writing it new financial and political realities brought a sea-change in the art world. Among the biggest casualties of the global recession were the arts, humanities and education budgets across the planet. Greek drama continues to hold a privileged place in international repertory, but the question now becomes whether the Greek chorus' political and aesthetic potential may be compromised by the financial realities of our times. Nowadays it is mostly big state theatres that support, or, at least, represent, the dominant ideology and a mainstream aesthetic, who are able in practical terms to include a big chorus in their

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<sup>440</sup> Supporters/sponsors/ of Theatrecombinat include: Wien Kultur (the city of the Vienna cultural authority), Goethe Institute, Wiener Linien, and Association Genève-Berlin. Co-producers include National Theatre Brunswick and FFT Dusseldorf. See more on [www.theatercombinat.com](http://www.theatercombinat.com)

<sup>441</sup> See chapter 2, p.35 and chapter 5, p.76.

productions. Smaller, independent companies, who produce politically engaged work and/or have an agenda of aesthetic innovation, operate on a very small budget, which usually leads to a reduction or a complete elimination of the chorus. But, despite their limited means, their innovative and experimental approach means that such theatre groups are perhaps more relevant in a discussion of the chorus' potential to generate discourse on current sociopolitical issues and to challenge mainstream aesthetics.

Prefacing a publication on the hot topic of cultural/historical context in classical reception, Savas Patsalidis frames the question of historical relevance and topicality in a way that is particularly useful in a discussion of the chorus, since it addresses issues of collective identity and representation:

What happens when the nation-state is undergoing radical politico-cultural changes, when shifts and developments make the representation of people as a national body and as individuals very problematic? We may not have the answer to that; yet, one thing is certain: every time the world changes there is a change both in the way practitioners (and theorists) update, rework, appropriate, re-write, or adapt their material, modern or classic, and in the way viewers and historical communities receive them.<sup>442</sup>

Greece, among the countries worst hit by the financial crisis, is an ideal case study for a discussion of the chorus in this new era. The Greek theatre scene continues to invest a large part of its decimated budget in the production of Attic drama, as part of a decades-long tradition of great cultural and national significance. In chapter 2, I noted that the performance history of the chorus in contemporary Greece is considered by scholars a 'success story'. But the recent financial calamity brought great shifts in the aesthetics and ideological content of Greek drama revivals, shifts that include the way the chorus is represented. Therefore, in this chapter, the chorus in contemporary Greece is revisited, with particular focus on its political dynamic as a group representing the citizen body, and on its potential as a mercurial theatrical form within this new aesthetic. The peculiarities of reception in contemporary Greece will bring national self-definition into the discussion, a phenomenon whose origins are mainly linked with Greek tragedy productions at the theatre of Epidaurus. At the same time, a major part of the cultural and historical context of this particular moment is a radical change of policy that encouraged

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<sup>442</sup> Patsalidis, 2014.

small, independent companies to produce Greek tragedy, by admitting young-generation artists into prestigious venues such as the Greek Festival, heretofore reserved for state theatres and big-name productions from abroad. Paradoxically, state support for small independent theatre companies is currently non-existent in Greece.

The question I will be asking in this chapter is whether it is possible for the chorus to be re-discovered, by becoming urgent and topical, in the new economic climate. Can the new social and financial realities trigger true innovation in form and content that can be meaningful both aesthetically and politically? Finally, in the era of global crisis, perhaps we need to be asking this: how do we reconcile the content of the Greek plays, (their philosophical dimension and their challenging of established ideologies), and the ethics of contemporary theatre productions?

The main case study in this chapter will be the work of independent theatre company *Horos* (Χώρος), until recently a touring company and currently based in Athens. In the last decade Horos have established themselves as one of the most well-respected experimental theatre companies in Greece, performing at prestigious venues such as the Onassis Cultural Centre and the Epidaurus festival.

I chose to focus on Horos because over the years they have developed a distinctive aesthetic identity, through a decade-long research process culminating in their recent production of Euripides' *Orestes* (2016). Horos theatre company are re-negotiating the modern Greek relationship with tragedy, which for decades has been a prism for understanding the present through the past. Their relationship with roots and national self-definition breaks with the established norms, rejecting simplistic notions of 'continuity', but also goes beyond ironic and detached notions of meta-tradition: the director and founder, Simos Kakalas, has pursued the long term goal of exploring Greek tradition and identity through his work. This search directed him to re-examine how *folk roots* are still a part of contemporary Greek-ness. As a result, the company's authentic approach to classical drama combines topicality and universality. Furthermore, their work has a strong political dimension, and responds with urgency to the current social and political context. This is especially true of their recent *Orestes* and their 2011-2012 production of the Cretan Renaissance verse drama *Erophili*. Finally, their approach to the chorus, even though not the main focus of their work, is certainly innovative. Despite all these achievements, Horos, like many other small independent theatre companies, stopped receiving state funding in 2012.

In order to provide context for the aesthetics and ideological content of the work of Horos I will look at the following turning points in the recent history of Greek drama revivals in Greece, that have also had an impact on the staging of the chorus:

Simos Kakalas' unexpected (for an experimental artist) claim that he is looking to reconnect with the *folk roots* (λαϊκότητα) of Greek theatre tradition, in a wider context of an exploration of authenticity in national identity, has led me to investigate the evolution of the presence of folk elements in modern Greek performances of Attic drama, starting where I left off in Chapter 2, which included a brief overview of the staging the chorus in Greece in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In this chapter, the investigation will be focused on the period from 1989 to the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with particular emphasis on the influential work of Kostas Tsianos with the Municipal District Theatre of Larissa (Thessaliko teatro).

The second vital factor in the shaping of contemporary theatre aesthetics in Greece is the impact of auteur directors. Directorial authorship, or Regietheater, entered the Greek theatre scene in the 1990s, influencing the younger generation of artists, and resulting in post-modern and non-Aristotelean techniques becoming more widely employed, even in the case of Attic drama.

Next I will discuss aspects of the current theatre scene in Athens, such as the changes in the practicalities of theatre production and a new approach to national self-definition: as social structures crumbled under the huge economic calamity, national humiliation and crisis lead a new generation of independent artists to continue to work in theatre with renewed passion, investigating their roots and working with a post-modern vocabulary.

This new generation's approach to Greek drama is the focus of my next section. In 2014 and 2015 the Greek festival,<sup>443</sup> under the artistic direction of George Loukos, included in its programming some Greek drama revivals by young directors who were relatively new to the scene or came from a fringe/experimental theatre background. This marked a turning point for the festival and arguably for the contemporary tradition of Greek drama revivals.

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<sup>443</sup> The Greek Festival (Ελληνικό Φεστιβάλ) takes place in July and August each year and includes the programming of the performances at the Athens and Epidaurus festivals. So the 'Epidaurus festival' is not a separate organization anymore, although I use the term sometimes to refer to performances at that theatre.

In my analysis of the main case study of this chapter, the work of Horos theatre company, I will focus mostly on their recent production of Euripides' *Orestes*, which played in Thessaloniki, at the Epidauros Festival and finally in Athens.

## **2. The folk element in revivals of Attic Drama in Contemporary Greece.**

### **i. Greek national self-definition in tragedy: from the worship of antiquity to the re-discovery of folk roots**

The origins of the dominant aesthetic of tragedy revivals in the first half of the 20th century can be traced to the strong link between the revival of Greek drama in 1940s Greece and conservative patriotism. Recent scholarship has examined the ideological reasons that lead to the cold-war conservative government's plan to present tragedy as a Greek 'product' to the outside world, using it as a propaganda tool to support the idea of continuity with a classical past.<sup>444</sup> The National Theatre would lead this effort, producing and touring these plays and creating an aesthetic that would dominate tragedy for decades.<sup>445</sup> This policy created a contemporary tradition of staging Greek drama, influenced by European Romantic Hellenism, and characterized by visual references to ancient Greek iconography.<sup>446</sup> In chapter 2 of this thesis I included an overview of this aesthetic tradition, particularly with regard to the chorus. In terms of technique, this so-called authentic way of doing tragedy has some recognizable hallmarks, such as the grand heroic characters, the 'decorum' in behaviour, the declamatory style of acting and the large chorus, which over the years included singing influenced by Byzantine music, and a strict choreography and uniform movement.

The crucial role of Greek drama in modern Greek self-definition throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century is also emphasized in Vassiliki Lalioti's examination of social memory and the construction of ethnic identity in modern Greece, which uses as a case study the observation of the rehearsal process of the 1997 *Lysistrata* of the National Theatre.<sup>447</sup> Specifically, she notes the widespread notion, shared among performers, audience and

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<sup>444</sup> See for example Van Steen (2007) 155-157 and (2000) 51. On the formation of a discourse of Greek exceptionalism on the basis of a direct relationship with ancient texts and spaces see also Ioannidou (2010) 389-90.

<sup>445</sup> See Chapter 2 p.47.

<sup>446</sup> See Ioannidou (2010) 386.

<sup>447</sup> Lalioti (2002).



critics, that the collective social memory of Greek performers can be activated and national continuity reinforced through and towards the performance of Greek drama—a genre for which contemporary Greeks, more than any other people, possess a deep, genetic understanding.<sup>448</sup>

Eleftheria Ioannidou has also shown how notions of authenticity, ownership and identity have dominated the discourse surrounding Attic drama revivals in Greece for decades. Ioannidou also emphasizes that performance of Greek drama revivals in ancient theatres is the linchpin in the argument of continuity, since it creates an ‘illusionary conflation of ancient past and Greek present.’<sup>449</sup> Since Greek drama is a locus of self-definition, Greeks naturally feel that they own the traditional ‘tools’ to unlock its secrets.<sup>450</sup> At the same time, non-Greek revivals, especially at Epidauros, were for decades regarded with hostility.<sup>451</sup>

But what are these traditional tools exactly and how do they gain ‘authentic’ status in almost eight decades of regular Greek drama performances? In reality, of course, the method is elusive. Lalioti points out that ‘the agony over the preservation of old forms and the simultaneous need for innovation in these performances shows that the “invention of tradition” is also present here.’<sup>452</sup>

Lalioti’s and Ioannidou’s conclusions are very close to my own experience as a theatre practitioner living in Greece and Cyprus, where, until recently, the discourse on Greek drama included debate about how it ‘should be done’, even though the dogma of ‘authenticity’ changes every few years.<sup>453</sup> Koun, Rontiris, Solomos, and perhaps Haralambous, Tsianos and Koniordou, among others, have all in turn contributed to a collective modern Greek notion of the ‘correct’ way of doing tragedy: since this notion can’t be based on any real evidence from antiquity, it is based on the cultural impact of some significant artists and productions that shaped the history of revivals in the modern era. As Lalioti concludes, the *memory* of experiencing these influential productions, during which perhaps they felt deeply connected to the material, is what creates the collective memory of *authenticity* for modern Greek performers and practitioners.<sup>454</sup>

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<sup>448</sup> Lalioti (2002) 114 and 130-131.

<sup>449</sup> Ioannidou (2010) 390.

<sup>450</sup> Lalioti (2002) 126-127.

<sup>451</sup> See Ioannidou (2010) 385-386.

<sup>452</sup> Lalioti (2002) 136.

<sup>453</sup> See Sidiropoulou (2014a) 13.

<sup>454</sup> Lalioti (2002) 134.

For several years, a key component of this constructed authenticity was the use of Greek *folk elements* in Attic drama revivals. In Chapter 2, I discussed Koun's use of recognizable contemporary Greek and Mediterranean folk ritual to energize the tragic chorus through echoes of shared traditions. But Koun's most vibrant and influential use of folk elements was of course in his work on Aristophanes, in productions that achieved legendary status.

In order to trace the use of the folk element in Greek drama and its evolution into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as part of the wider context of Greek drama reception and Greek self-definition, I have to start with Koun's Greek Folk Expressionism (Λαϊκός εξπρεσιονισμός). Gonda Van Steen's analysis of this term, in the context of the political and ideological conflicts of the mid-20th century in Greece, explains its lasting impact on contemporary Greek theatre, since these class conflicts have never ceased to exist:

Koun approached Aristophanic comedy through the method of what he called Greek Folk Expressionism, with the purpose of turning *Birds* into a feast for the eyes, ears and popular mind. This modernist paradigm engaged Koun in a lifelong search for remnants of native popular culture: it stressed the continuity and unity of the vernacular, rather than the learned Greek heritage, and legitimised the Romaic and folkloric element of indigenous Greekness. [...] As a problematic geared towards tradition and performance, Koun's Folk Expressionism reinvented Aristophanes, thereby turning his oeuvre into a grassroots form of modern Greek theatre and culture. From this movement, the laikos (popular) poet emerged as the champion of the Greek people and of the political Left. This 'folk Aristophanes' handed contemporaries a key to overlooked layers of the more recent Greek past, and encouraged artists like Koun to set you on a quest for Greek authenticity through comedy. The playwright and his antiheroes functioned as channels of direct access to the *laikotita* (populism) and Romaiosyne of the autochthonous people of a pristine and unchanged rural Greek landscape.<sup>455</sup>

In other words, Koun's vision, in reacting against a constructed theatrical tradition, had the ideological drive of cold-war era class conflict and reclaimed Greek drama for the people. The folk elements in his Aristophanes productions constituted clear allusions to the Greek countryside, especially by creating the atmosphere of the country fair, using visual references and techniques from the popular shadow theatre Karagiozis and from folk carnival traditions.<sup>456</sup> Teatro Technis and Koun produced most Aristophanic

<sup>455</sup> Van Steen (2007) 164.

<sup>456</sup> For example, in his 1976 *Acharnians*, the set, designed by Dionysis Fotopoulos, consisted of an authentic looking shadow-theatre (karagiozis) screen.

comedies until his death in 1987, continuously tapping into the traditions and imagery of rural Greece, creating one of the most influential trends in staging Aristophanes in the six last decades and changing the way this playwright was perceived in Greece and abroad.<sup>457</sup>

The countless examples of modern Greek ‘Aristophanes-as-a-country-fair’ productions by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> show that this initially revolutionary idea quickly became the norm.<sup>458</sup> In this period the *fustanella*<sup>459</sup> becomes for comedy what the *chlamys* was for tragedy in the first years of the Epidaurus festival.

Like all repeated forms, this folk approach would eventually become a convention and lose its innovative edge. It was perceived as an oppressive dominant aesthetic by some artists as early as the mid-90s, as we can infer from the comment of director Yiannis Rigas: ‘I am sick and tired of watching performances of Aristophanes with big breasts, huge bottoms, and erected phalluses. I am tired of this [country] fair (‘panigiri’): why should Aristophanes be a fair? Is it written somewhere?’<sup>460</sup>

Whereas rural Greece was for decades considered the natural habitat of Aristophanes, there is an essential difference in the way the folk element was treated in tragedy. As we saw in the analysis of Koun’s *Oresteia* in Chapter 2 and Haralambous’ *Suppliants* in Chapter 4, folk traditions may provide inspiration in tragedy, but only as individual elements in a world that is filled with a variety of other visual and aural references and symbols. These two landmark productions both tapped into local traditions; the play world, however, was definitely not a clear allusion to or representation of a Greek (or Cypriot) village. The folk musical motifs and rituals such as lamentation and the allusions to the Orthodox liturgy were mixed with other ritual, musical and visual elements from the Eastern Mediterranean and Africa. Furthermore, the mise-en-scène was based on an enhanced use of theatrical ritual and teeming with symbolic uses of

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<sup>457</sup> For the national and international impact of Koun’s treatment of Aristophanes see Van Steen 2000 and 2007.

<sup>458</sup> A few recent examples of productions of ‘folk’ Aristophanes: *Peace* by the National Theatre of Northern Greece, directed by Yiannis Iordanides (2005), *Acharnians* by the National Theatre, directed by Vangelis Theodoropoulos (2005), *Acharnians* by the State Theatre of Northern Greece directed by Sotiris Hatzakis (2010), *Lysistrata* by the National Theatre of Greece directed by Kostas Tsianos (2004).

<sup>459</sup> Fustanella is a pleated kilt, the traditional men’s costume in many areas of the Balkans and mainland Greece.

<sup>460</sup> Rigas (1996), quoted in Lalioti (2002) 134.

objects and sets, such as the use of the mask as a transformative device. This kind of invented theatrical ritual, based on an eclectic and intercultural use of signifiers and motifs, is quite different than the *mimesis* of living Greek folk ritual evocative of a specific time and place.

However, from the end of the 1980s onwards, a heightened use of the folk element with clear references to peasant life begins to feature dynamically in the visual, aural and choreographic arsenal of tragic performance, with emphasis on the treatment of the chorus. In the influential productions I will discuss in the following section, the Greek countryside was much more than an echo or an allusion: it was clearly the setting of the play, with topical references clearly present in every element of design, music, dance and even speech. It was thus elevated to a higher status, suitable to be a setting for tragedy. It is possible to connect this aesthetics to some cultural-historical shifts taking place at the time: the beginning of the 80s saw the first socialist government rise to power in Greece, with a cultural agenda which included decentralization. This was the right historical juncture for the Greek countryside to be reclaimed as a locus of self-definition and national pride.

## **ii. Peasants' tragedy: Thessaliko Theatro, Kostas Tsianos and Lydia Koniordou**

In 1975 theatre artists Anna Vagenas, Kostas Tsianos and Yiorgos Ziakas, all natives of Larissa in Central Greece, decided to found a theatre company that would tour the culturally marginalized areas of rural Thessaly. In 1983 the independent company became the Municipal Regional Theatre of Larissa (Δημοτικό Περιφερειακό Θέατρο Λάρισσας), widely known as Thessaliko Theatro (Thessalian Theatre). During that time the newly-appointed Socialist government created the institution of Municipal Regional Theatres all over Greece, funded by the Ministry of Culture and by local Municipalities.<sup>461</sup> Thessaliko Theatro, one of the most successful of these state-supported theatres, has produced several Greek tragedies that have been influential in the history of reception of this genre, participating frequently in the Epidaurus festival and touring abroad. In a 2009 interview, artistic director Kostas Tsianos reiterated his diachronic

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<sup>461</sup> On the history of the regional theatres in Greece see Bacopoulou-Ilalls (1998) 290-91.

goals as ‘connecting with the local society [...] introducing the average spectator to important plays and production, supporting Greek playwriting, and starting winter tours in Thessaly.’<sup>462</sup> According to the theatre’s website the founding principle of the company was ‘to bring the inhabitants of provincial districts and remote villages in contact with the art of theatre [...] To become an essential, substantial Popular Theatre.’<sup>463</sup>

Undoubtedly the most important production in this theatre’s history was the 1988 Euripides’ *Electra*, directed by Tsianos and launching the career of Lydia Koniordou, who was to become one of the most well-known and acclaimed performers of tragedy in Greece. The production premiered in Larissa, played in Athens’ Lycabettus theatre in 1988, and participated in the 1989 Epidaurus festival, marking a turning point for Thessaliko Theatro and for modern Greek tragic revivals. Reviews at the time were overwhelmingly positive, while reviews of later productions by the same theatre or of the same play would frequently make the comparison with that ‘legendary’ *Electra*—which is proof that it had instantly achieved the status of a classic.<sup>464</sup>

The text was translated by Christos Samouelides into demotic Greek in iambic decapentasyllabic verse, the metre of folk and oral poetry and of 19<sup>th</sup> century pastoral melodrama.<sup>465</sup> The costumes by Yiorgos Ziakas were based on the traditional dress of Thessalian peasants. For the first time in a tragic performance all the characters—and not just Electra’s lower-class husband in the play—looked like farmers or shepherds: the men wore traditional heavy black capes and the chorus women wore the traditional black Thessalian *sigkouni*,<sup>466</sup> and black headscarves. In choosing a black and white colour palette (with the exception of Clytemnestra’s dark red costume), minimal and clean lines, and unadorned fabrics, Ziakas visually elevated rural Thessaly to the status of tragedy. The music by Nikos Xydakis, inspired by the folk music of central and northern Greece, provided a continuous score that gave the rural setting an epic and ritual dimension. The iambic decapentasyllabic verse, though very unusual for tragedy, was recited in the heightened tragic style and together with the atmospheric music evoked rural tradition without being ‘folksy’.

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<sup>462</sup> Vidalis (2009).

<sup>463</sup> Thessaliko Theatro: Mission.

<sup>464</sup> A 2003 review of Euripides’ *Electra* by the Municipal Regional Theatre of Patras recalls the 1989 *Electra* of Thessaliko Theatro as ‘legendary’. (Kathimerini, 2003.)

<sup>465</sup> Sykka in her review of the production called the decapentasyllabic ‘our national verse’, which points to its emotional resonance with the audience. (Sykka, 1989).

<sup>466</sup> A *sigkouni* is a sleeveless long waistcoat worn over the dress and fastened with a metal brooch, a standard part of the traditional women’s dress in many parts of mainland Greece, including Thessaly.

The Thessalian countryside setting was particularly conducive to a successful treatment of the chorus, since that area of Greece has its own living traditional dance and song culture as well as communal customs and rituals that were clearly evoked in the *mise-en-scène*. The choreography, also by Tsianos, was closely based on the slow and solemn folk dances of Thessaly.

It is significant for the level of authenticity in the contextualization of the play in Thessaly that Tsianos, of Thessalian descent himself, was familiar enough with that area's traditions and dances to choreograph the production himself. His life-long interest and visceral connection to the dance and music of his native area is one of the tools he used in many productions that followed *Electra*, whether he was choreographing or not. For example, in an interview for a 2004 production of *Lysistrata*, he states: 'I danced various dances for the composer and the choreographer, in order to direct them towards certain traditional elements that I know very well.'<sup>467</sup> For the same production he claims that he danced for the company, in order to get them into the 'traditional' mood of the play.<sup>468</sup> Therefore, the director's deep personal connection to the folk setting and his ability to communicate it to the artistic team and to the chorus members of the 1988 *Electra*—which certainly included natives of Thessaly—was a key to its 'authentic' quality and to its success in general. The performers' deep personal connection to a pre-existing shared code, especially strong in the case of the chorus, radiated out to the audience.

In this respect, the production fits Mary-Kay Gamel's definition of 'expressive authenticity', which she borrows from Dutton and applies to performance of classical drama: the term has to do with 'an object's character as a true expression of an individual's or a society's values and beliefs', and involves 'committed, personal expression, being true ... to one's artistic self.'<sup>469</sup> Expressive authenticity in performance then is proportionate to 'the "truth" of the author's expression of his own values and beliefs; the participating artists' understanding of, and personal commitment to, the performance they are creating, and audiences' commitment to engaging with and evaluating that performance.'<sup>470</sup>

The reviews almost universally speak of the huge emotional resonance this setting and interpretation had with the vast majority of the spectators, including theatre

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<sup>467</sup> Aggelikopoulos (2004).

<sup>468</sup> Aggelikopoulos (2004).

<sup>469</sup> Gamel (2010) 155.

<sup>470</sup> Gamel (2010) 156.

practitioners, intellectuals and ‘ordinary people’.<sup>471</sup> Several reviewers, both of the Lycabettus and the Epidauros performance, called the Thessalian *Electra* the best Greek tragedy production of recent years.<sup>472</sup> One review from Epidauros reports that the audience gave a seven-minute standing ovation.<sup>473</sup> Evocative review titles give us a further sense of its cultural impact: for example, Theodoros Kritikós’ review is entitled ‘Electra Karagouna’<sup>474</sup>: *karagouna* is the female form of *karagounis*, a member of an ethnic group of peasants from Western Thessaly, who are inhabitants of the plains and traditionally farmers. The female form ‘karagouna’ may also refer to a very well-known circular dance of Thessaly, alluded to in the choreography. By combining two seemingly incongruous words, the title, like the production, brings together two completely different worlds: that of culturally marginalized, rural Thessaly and that of the high art of tragedy.

As for the chorus, reviewers universally agreed that it was a great success: as a collective that embodied shared traditions, so close to a realistic representation of a group of traditional village women, they had a strong aura of authority and contributed decisively to the atmosphere and tone of the production. It was one of the rare occasions when they seemed to exist within a code that was recognizable and familiar, not by evoking previous theatrical productions of tragedy, as usually happens with the modern Greek experience of the chorus, but by referencing familiar traditional non-theatrical settings and forms:

The chorus, with their black sigkounia, holding white drums, sent shivers of emotion among audience members with their every step, with a choreography based on ritual funeral dances of Macedonia, Thessaly and Pontus.<sup>475</sup>

The success of this directorial concept inevitably prompted comments on what ‘should’ and ‘shouldn’t’ be done with tragedy. As Sidiropoulou notes, this heated debate among critics is an annual occurrence accompanying the festival at Epidauros, and is usually centred around the legitimacy of ‘experimentation’ versus what are considered ‘traditional’ readings.<sup>476</sup> For example, one reviewer was happy that the ‘disorienting influences of modern European theatre’ were avoided in this *Electra*, and that instead, by

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<sup>471</sup> Sykka (1989), Kritikós (1988).

<sup>472</sup> Sykka (1989).

<sup>473</sup> Sarigiannis (1989).

<sup>474</sup> Kritikós (1988).

<sup>475</sup> See Sykka (1989). Also Sarigiannis (1989) calls the chorus ‘exemplary’.

<sup>476</sup> See Sidiropoulou (2014a) 13.

approaching tragedy through traditional elements, the artistic team ‘discovered some of the more overlooked aspects of ancient dramatic art: its traditional character and the strictly pre-determined, collectively shared schemata.’<sup>477</sup>

Reviews of Thessaliko Theatro productions in the following years, through comparison with *Electra*, reveal that the ‘folk’ approach, although considered a ‘bold experimentation’<sup>478</sup> in 1988, was gradually becoming established as one of the ‘correct’ ways to do tragedy. For example, Theodoros Kritikós, in his review of the 1990 *Iphigenia in Tauris*, compares it to the *Electra* and summarizes the main ‘trends’ in the performance of Greek drama of that time, finding them less successful than Tsianos’ approach:

an *Electra* [...] not based on the well-known signs of the Ethniko Theatre ‘tradition.’ Nor the arbitrariness of the so-called innovators. That was neither ‘academic’, nor ‘avant-garde.’ That did not use [ancient Greek] cloaks nor modern dress nor a ‘timeless’ combination of the two.<sup>479</sup>

The legacy of this production also brings to mind Gamel’s term ‘inductive authenticity’, which she defines as ‘the authenticity that is focussed on the audience, trying to engage them as the original productions might have done. Modern productions and adaptations which may seem radically innovative, unfaithful, subversive, even parodic or satiric, but which provoke critical and emotional responses in their audiences, more closely resemble ancient performances in their *effect*.’<sup>480</sup> Perhaps the *Electra* of Tsianos did not have exactly the same meaning as Euripides intended. However, we could say that it was inductively and expressively authentic: the artistic team’s emotional relationship to the material and the audience’s universally positive and visceral response, revealed in that moment ‘an unusually powerful connection with the themes of Athenian tragedy.’<sup>481</sup>

This production’s exceptional quality becomes clearer when compared with the less impactful subsequent productions of the same artistic team that used a similar concept: in 1990 for example, the same team, Tsianos, Koniordou, Samouelides and Ziakas, produced *Iphigenia in Tauris*, with similar aesthetic and approach. The Epidaurus ticket was a given for Thessaliko Theatro, and the production was generally well received, although reviews focussed on whether the 1989 *Electra* concept was something that could

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<sup>477</sup> Kritikós (1988).

<sup>478</sup> Kritikós (1988).

<sup>479</sup> Kritikós (1990).

<sup>480</sup> Gamel (2010) 160.

<sup>481</sup> Gamel (2010) 164.



be successfully applied to other plays.<sup>482</sup> The ‘recipe for success’ was repeated in 1992 with *Choephoroi*, directed by Tsianos and again starring Lydia Koniordou playing both Electra and Clytemnestra.<sup>483</sup> The production, which again featured a powerful chorus of peasant women who were dancing, singing—performing—rituals of necromancy, lamentation and libation, was well received, toured extensively in Greece and Cyprus, and was revived in 2009. But despite its technical and aesthetic achievement, it did not have the innovative edge of the 1988 *Electra*.

Avra Sidiropoulou points out that an integral part of a successful re-contextualisation of Greek drama ‘is the construction of a self-contained universe on stage that bears its own rules and celebrates its own semiology.’<sup>484</sup> Therefore, setting these plays in rural Thessaly, a place with its own costumes, music, rituals, tradition and deep connection to the iambic decapentasyllabic verse through oral poetry, was a very successful re-contextualisation, especially for the chorus, who were able to dance, sing, speak and perform ritual within a very recognizable, non-theatrical code. However, there is a crucial distinction here that sets these productions apart from other contemporary proximations of tragedy from around the world: these productions are not perceived by their creators as re-contextualisations. Rather, it is significant that all of them were seen by the artistic team as a way to *return* to the original, to *reconnect* with its essence but also with the *original* theatrical form, since the original’s codes and traditions are perceived as *continuing* to live today within the traditional culture of the unspoiled countryside. In an interview given on the occasion of the 2009 revival of *Choephoroi*, Tsianos states:

My goal to draw ideas and find solutions to the challenges of performance of Greek drama, through folk rituals, folk performances, customs, music, lament, folk tales and dance, found its most complete realization in *Choephoroi*. It is obvious in this play that Aeschylus was referencing traditions and legends related to the worship of the dead, to necromancy, to funeral lament and dance, which are elements that are still alive today

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<sup>482</sup> Pagkourelis (1990), in a piece entitled ‘Tradition for own consumption’, argued that *Iphigenia in Tauris* was unsuccessful, and that the previous year’s *Electra* had been an exception that proved the rule: that to make such specific re-contextualization of tragedy is dangerous and reductive.

<sup>483</sup> Tsianos also followed a similar ‘folk’ aesthetic concept when directing Euripides’ *Hecuba* for the National theatre. But critics noted that the play seemed ‘tired’, despite the high quality of individual elements, attributing the failure of the production to the fact that there was no chemistry between the National Theatre company, traditionally a bastion of bourgeois values, and the director. See for example Georgousopoulos (1994) and Christides (1994).

<sup>484</sup> Sidiropoulou (2014a) 7.

and are able to profoundly move us.<sup>485</sup>

Similarly, some reviewers agree that Thessaliko Theatro's productions, in successfully employing the folk element, are much more than successful re-settings: rather, they 'explore the roots and genetic code of tragedy', and in the use of traditional elements they 'restore to tragedy the lost strictness of expression of the ancient theatre.'<sup>486</sup>

The use of the decapentasyllabic verse serves this same purpose. On the translation of *Choephoroi*, this time by Tsianos himself, the director comments: 'The funeral paeans and laments dominate the greater part of the play and consist of a rhythmic speech, that could not be any other than our "national" decapentasyllabic, whose secrets I happen to know very well.'<sup>487</sup> Thus the 'national' verse of oral poetry and pastoral drama becomes a way of 'communicating' with the poetic form of the original, based on the assumption that the poetic genres in the original text have themselves traditional folk roots.

The 2004 reunion of Tsianos and Koniordou at the National Theatre to do an Aristophanic comedy folk-style seemed like the natural development of their long and fruitful collaboration and exploration of tradition. This production of *Lysistrata* was generally well-received but at the same time considered 'old-school', in Greece as well as in the US, where it toured.<sup>488</sup> Talking about this *Lysistrata*, Costas Tsianos again reveals his core belief that, through the traditional folk roots he intimately knows, he was able to reach the roots of the original performance with authenticity:

I am absolutely convinced that this play is descendent from phallic songs, it is as 'folk' as *Acharnians* and *Peace*, even though some people think it is urban [...] Even the well-known scene of Myrrine and Kinesias [...] I am certain it is based on traditional phallic performance. I have seen such things performed during carnival in the countryside, without the people knowing what Aristophanes is or what Attic comedy is.<sup>489</sup>

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<sup>485</sup> Vidalis (2009).

<sup>486</sup> Kritikos (1990).

<sup>487</sup> Vidalis (2009).

<sup>488</sup> Isherwood (2004).

<sup>489</sup> Aggelikopoulos (2004).

This was the production that also revealed the comic talent of Nicos Karathanos as a fustanella-wearing Kinesias. Karathanos is an actor and director,<sup>490</sup> who has also starred in tragedy revivals exploring the folk element in the *mise-en-scène*, such as the experimental *Oedipus Tyrannus at Colonus*, directed by Sotiris Hatzakis,<sup>491</sup> another artist who has repeatedly and often successfully tapped into folk tradition. Formerly the artistic director of the National Theatre of Greece, one of Hatzakis' most memorable productions was the 2002-2003 *Night of the Goat*, a musical-dance-theatre performance based on traditional folk tales, but with a title evoking the ritual roots of tragedy.<sup>492</sup> He also staged *Iphigenia in Aulis* for Thessaliko Theatro, with strong folk elements in the chorus' costumes and choreography and with fustanella-wearing Achilles.<sup>493</sup> His critically acclaimed 1998 *Fonissa*, based on a novel by Papadiamantis, and starring Lydia Koniordou, was rooted in the rituals, music, and dance of rural Greece. It was frequently revived and toured around the world.<sup>494</sup>

With its proliferation and establishment as a theatrical tradition, maintained by many big names in the theatrical 'establishment', the folk element, in some ways and for some people, became the next step in a narrative of self-definition and search for identity, a narrative that had begun in the age of Modernity.<sup>495</sup> The underlying assumption that became established in tandem with this folk aesthetic was that Attic drama was predominantly a genre rooted in folk tradition, and as such best understood through the forms of a traditional rural culture. The idealized 'purity and nobility' of Greek antiquity was replaced by a vision of pristine folk life in the Greek countryside. For some years this trend provided an excellent re-contextualization for the chorus, whose collective nature provides an ideal embodiment of tradition and social memory.

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<sup>490</sup> He also recently directed the National Theatre's production of the Greek 19<sup>th</sup>-century pastoral melodrama *Golfo* for the Epidauros festival.<sup>490</sup>

<sup>491</sup> See chapter 4 of this thesis for more information on this production.

<sup>492</sup> *The Night of the Goat (H Nychta tou Tragou)* (2002-2003), produced by Politeia Theatre Company, written and directed by Sotiris Hatzakis, sets and costumes by Ersi Drini, music by Martha Frintzila, choreography by SINEQUANON, lighting by Antonis Panayiotopoulos.

<sup>493</sup> *Iphigenia in Aulis* (2007), produced by the Municipal State Theatre of Larissa (Thessaliko Theatro), translated by K.H. Myris, set and costume design by Ersi Drini and Yiannis Metzikof, music by Savvina Yiannatou and Petros Kourtis, choreography by Dimitris Soteriou, lights by Antonis Panayiotopoulos (2007).

<sup>494</sup> *Fonissa* (1998) by Alexandros Papadiamantis, adapted and directed by Sotiris Hatzakis, a co-production of Politeia theatre and Municipal Regional Theatre of Volos.

<sup>495</sup> See Lalioti (2002) and Ioannidou (2010).

### iii. Conclusion

The power of Greek drama to provoke discourse on authenticity and truth is not an exclusively Greek phenomenon. Martin Revermann, in examining the West's cultural relationship to Greek drama, observes the 'almost primal sense and perception of "rootedness" surrounding it. Greek drama is instrumentalized as a means to recover—something, a something which is easily construed as "true," or at least "truer" than what we normally experience.'<sup>496</sup> When the artists discussed above used traditional folk elements in Greek tragedy, they believed they were recovering something authentic. But, by now, this approach has been challenged by new voices in the theatre scene in Greece. As Wiles points out, in the history of revivals of Greek drama 'the element of authenticity keeps shifting [...] What seems authentic to one generation seems stilted, ill researched and irrelevant to the next.'<sup>497</sup>

The 'folk roots' dogma, in order to have a powerful resonance in performance—the inductive authenticity discussed above—needs the audience's (and the performers') familiarity and connection with folk traditions. Thus it becomes irrelevant for the younger, urbanized generation. The aesthetics also begin to seem dated, since, in the productions discussed above, even though the creators claim an authentic relationship to the countryside, the high declamatory style of delivery was still used in the acting, and was beginning to feel pompous. The connection to roots was perceived as superficial and a cliché for younger artists.

At the same time, there is another pole of influence that has been gaining ground in the Greek theatre scene since the 1990s, with acolytes in the younger generation: postmodernism and Regietheatre has, in the last few years, been steadily changing the field of Greek tragedy revivals. The search for self-definition continues, perhaps subconsciously: as traditional notions of Greek-ness are left out of this new aesthetics, the theatrical establishment is now looking to the West for answers.

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<sup>496</sup> Revermann (2008) 108.

<sup>497</sup> Wiles (2000) 179.

### 3. 1990s postmodernism: Auteur directors and regietheater in Greece

The work of auteur directors that emerged on the theatre scene in the 1990s, and their lasting influence on the Greek theatre scene, has to be taken into account as the cultural/aesthetic background of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century artists working on the classics today. At end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup>, revivals of canonical plays began to be talked about in terms of ‘apocathelosis’<sup>498</sup> (‘bringing down’), re-writing and de-constructing, in re-contextualisations that were often unsettling.<sup>499</sup> Theatrical trends such as non-realistic, post-modern techniques and directing as an act of authorship, trends which had been a staple of European stages since the 70s, are in the 1990s becoming increasingly influential in Greece.<sup>500</sup>

Sidiropoulou identifies three auteur directors that emerged in that era, still active and widely influential today, as having created a theatrical tradition of their own in Greece by inspiring a new generation of younger artists who admired, emulated or tried to reproduce their work: Michael Marmarinos, Yiannis Houvardas and Theodoros Terzopoulos.<sup>501</sup> To them we owe the entrance into the arsenal of approaches to Greek drama of techniques such open-ended readings that do not follow the Aristotelean structure of conflict and resolution leading to catharsis, site-specific staging, and the exploration of boundaries between audience and performers. The chorus begins to be redefined, within wider shifts in aesthetic and ideological context.

Especially prominent in the work of Marmarinos, the influence of performance art, which sees theatre as an act of awareness and as intervention within the community, creates a chorus of citizens or ‘turns actors into spokespeople for the disillusioned lot of our times.’<sup>502</sup> Marmarinos has always been interested in the chorus, ‘as an ancient form that can produce imagery both in theatre and in everyday life.’<sup>503</sup> In one of his most famous productions, Dimitris Dimitriadis’ *Dying as Country* (1978) in the 2007 Athens Festival, he used a chorus of two hundred people, both professional actors and ordinary citizens, which he likened to a Greek tragic chorus, ‘turning potential spectators into

<sup>498</sup> Kotsia, (2016): ‘Houvardas approached the trilogy as a palimpsest on which History is written and rewritten.’

<sup>499</sup> Since his controversial 1984 *Alcestis* presented at Epidaurus, Houvardas’ deconstructions of the classics continue to divide audience and critics. See Sidiropoulou (2014b) 127.

<sup>500</sup> Sidiropoulou (2014b) 121.

<sup>501</sup> Sidiropoulou (2014b) 126.

<sup>502</sup> Sidiropoulou (2014b) 124.

<sup>503</sup> From his CV on the School of Drama Website, Aristotle University: [http://www.thea.auth.gr/staff/michail\\_marmarinos/](http://www.thea.auth.gr/staff/michail_marmarinos/).

agents of action.<sup>504</sup> In another exploration of the chorus, in his site-specific 2012 *Insenso*, also by Dimitriadis, a chorus of twenty-one actresses perform the monologue of Livia Serpieri from Visconti's 1954 film *Senso*, while in his 2016 *Lysistrata* the chorus, who also often intervenes in scenes to narrate the story, becomes a protagonist as it consists of famous leading actresses, in distinctive costumes and with distinctive characterization.<sup>505</sup> The director claims that he cast those particular actresses in order 'to give them a the opportunity to talk about the city and about their feelings, to express their personalities, because they are all so different.'<sup>506</sup>

In another version of this exploration of community, Houvardas, in his 2010 production of Euripides' *Orestes* for the National Theatre of Greece, gave the chorus the meta-dramatic identity of a hyper-naturalistic group of international students visiting the site of Epidaurus, who enter the space before the lights go down, initially tricking the audience into thinking they are not part of the show. Being confronted with the dramatic characters on stage, they gradually entered the story and participated in the performance, becoming the play's chorus.<sup>507</sup> In Houvardas' 2016 *Oresteia*, produced by Lykofos Productions and presented at Epidaurus, the big-name company members all participated in the chorus as well as playing two main characters each, in a re-contextualization that examined the collective memory of the Greek Civil War.

The relationship between performance, history and the construction of memory and a sense of communal identity, is a common point of interest in the work of Marmarinos and Houvardas. In the 2011 *Herakles Mainomenos*, produced by the National Theatre, Marmarinos framed the mise-en-scène in a metaphor that juxtaposed history and memory, the latter being 'an official counterfeiting of the former.'<sup>508</sup> The arrival of the cast in a bus visible on stage, carrying their suitcases, reminded everyone of Theodore Aggelopoulos' emblematic film *O Thiassos* (1975), which is another instance of meta-dramatic exploration of history. His exploration of a collective presence on stage finds a particularly successful incarnation in this chorus, which was a 'hyper-composition of individualities instead of a choreographed group',<sup>509</sup> a mixture of young

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<sup>504</sup> Sidiropoulou (2014b) 124.

<sup>505</sup> Charami (2016).

<sup>506</sup> Kaltaki (2016).

<sup>507</sup> Sidiropoulou (2014b) 128 and Ioannidis (2010).

<sup>508</sup> Ioannidis (2011).

<sup>509</sup> Ioannidis (2011).

and old, embodying the transmission of collective memory as they shared among them the story-telling of Herakles' labours.

Another characteristic of this postmodern methodology is the use of an eclectic collage of stage idioms.<sup>510</sup> The use of music and movement, elements crucial for the realization of the chorus, is a part of this mosaic. It is no longer a question of who will write the music for the choral odes, since these directors borrow from a variety of theatre traditions in their use of song and dance. For example, in Houvardas' 2016 *Oresteia* we hear well-known 1940s songs, from a vinyl record player,<sup>511</sup> that stimulate the audience's cultural memory of a pivotal moment in Greek history.<sup>512</sup> At the same time in this production the music becomes a postmodern element that interrupts traditional storytelling: '[Houvardas] wants to turn us into cold observers of the story. This is what the music aims to achieve, by being every so often interpolated, interrupting the flow of events, in a way commenting on them while at the same time showing off its independence.'<sup>513</sup> In Marmarinos' 2016 *Lysistrata*, in an unusual choice for Aristophanes and Epidauros, the atmospheric music by Dimitris Kamarotos was played live on a grand piano on stage, providing a constant musical score. At the end of the play, the pianist entered the action and became the allegorical figure of Syndiallage ('Reconciliation').

Formalism and strict control of the stage picture, another hallmark of many auteur directors, is part of the legacy especially of Theodoros Terzopoulos. Much has been written about this internationally renowned director, who over the years developed his own language for the stage, a rigorous method of physical theatre, influenced by Asian theatre traditions, that seeks to unleash non-verbal modes of communication.<sup>514</sup> Terzopoulos' 1986 *Bacchae* with Attis theatre company shocked the Greek establishment, but he is now a household name. He has directed numerous productions of Greek tragedy in Greece and abroad, often in multi-national collaborations. His physical theatre method and his approach to tragedy are taught in many universities around the world, while his seminars and workshops on his method are very popular among new generation artists and directors.

The work of these directors has in recent years been a standard feature of the Greek festival, while they also have flourishing careers abroad. They frequently

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<sup>510</sup> Sidiropoulou (2014b) 127.

<sup>511</sup> Patsalidis (2016).

<sup>512</sup> The use of music in this production is typical of Houvardas. See Sidiropoulou (2014b) 127.

<sup>513</sup> Patsalidis (2016).

<sup>514</sup> See for example Decreus (2010), (2011) and Sidiropoulou (2014b) 129-132.

collaborate with the National Theatre (Houvardas was the artistic director until 2015) and the National Theatre of Northern Greece, in high-profile, big-budget productions. Although not unaffected by the economic crisis, these are not yet among the theatres that face complete financial ruin, nor are they forced to work guerrilla-style, in self-funded shared-profit productions, like countless other important groups in Greece. Furthermore, there is another ethical issue, resulting from the economics of cultural activity in our increasingly globalized world: in the international network of high-profile theatre festivals, in which these directors regularly participate, the commodification of art creates a discrepancy between the plays' meaning and the economics of their production. The big budgets, the complicated and expensive technical requirements, not to mention the audience's consumerist attitude towards the status-symbol-ticket, are morally irreconcilable with the plays' meaning, in the context of the current economic and ideological crisis.<sup>515</sup>

Nevertheless, these directors, by introducing innovation within mainstream institutions, and in massively attended festivals, paved the way for radical adaptations of Greek drama by a younger generation who have more limited means but perhaps exemplify a more honest alignment between production ethics and ideological content in their work.

#### **4. Theatre in Depression Greece**

In 2009 the economic crisis hit Greece, putting an end to an era of prosperity and taking most people by surprise. It is difficult to express in this chapter the magnitude of this historical event, with effects on all sections of society, including artistic production. Patsalidis and Stavrakopoulou explain its effects in terms of ideology and aesthetics:

Overnight a whole nation entered the 'real world' via a shocking crisis which created a rupture between the individual and the collective perception of the nation and its ideologies. What people thought was 'there' and 'theirs,' all of a sudden disappeared behind a vaporous wall of clouds. From the comforting 'certainties' of modernism people passed to the discomfiting openness (and dystopian uncertainties) of postmodernism that called for painful redefinitions and new poetics of

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<sup>515</sup> See for example Kershaw (1996) 66-67.



representation. Long forgotten identity politics came back hand in hand with an identity crisis: Who am I? Who are they? Why me?<sup>516</sup>

During the deepest economic recession in recent memory the phenomenon of migration put further strain on Greek society, while on the political front, the rise of extreme right wing at home and humiliation and ‘bullying’ abroad created an ideological Scylla and Charybdis. As is typical in contemporary national economies in crisis, the budget for culture was heavily cut. For theatre, a particularly expensive art as it requires the collaboration of a variety of specialists, and the use of costly resources and services, this was a heavy blow. Since 2012, state sponsorship for independent theatre has ceased to exist, while private sponsorship is not yet part of the picture, without the proper fiscal rewards in place. The National Theatre and the National Theatre of Northern Greece had their budgets drastically reduced, while the system that supported the sixteen Municipal Regional theatres, which relied on both local and central government funding, is steadily falling apart.<sup>517</sup>

Astonishingly these new financial realities did not reduce the frequency or diversity of theatre production. The 2015 season closed with a record 1542 performances in Athens, compared to 1447 in 2014 and 1050 in 2013.<sup>518</sup> The most striking fact is that the majority of these productions are put on by independent groups who receive no state subsidy, work on a profit-share basis or agree to work for no pay in the hope that next time the terms of employment will be better or the profits increased.<sup>519</sup> These young artists, despite the impossible conditions, ‘insist on searching for the dark, the advanced, the violent, the difficult.’<sup>520</sup> It seems that the social and ideological crisis caused by the economic depression is a fertile environment for an art form such as theatre, which draws on debate, conflict, and the complexity of human relationships. Political discourse in theatre is a field undergoing a redefinition, and is characterized by urgency and the need for relevance. In my experience, both as an artist working in this environment and as an audience member, I have seen political theatre, or theatre with a social message, take the form of devised theatre, community projects such performances in refugee camps or hospitals and, of course, adaptations of Greek drama, in which young, experimental artists

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<sup>516</sup> Patsalidis and Stavrakopoulou (2014).

<sup>517</sup> See Mountraki (2016).

<sup>518</sup> See Mountraki (2016).

<sup>519</sup> See Patsalidis (2014b) and Mountraki (2016).

<sup>520</sup> Patsalidis (2014b).

are becoming increasingly interested. Patsalidis, who calls the young theatre artists ‘the most reliable chroniclers of the depression’, has noted the diversity of focus, style, and degree of professionalism among these companies. But he also pinpoints certain concerns that unite them, such as their interest in theatre’s interdisciplinarity and its ability to function as a tool of social and political awareness, their rejection of old forms and values and their sensitivity towards ethics of theatre production.<sup>521</sup>

Another striking phenomenon of the last five years was the renewed focus on a search for self-definition through theatre. The National Theatre’s 2011-2013 season had the general title ‘What is our homeland?’ The artistic director Yiannis Houvardas announced that the repertoire was based on a ‘triple query: how we see ourselves, how the others see us, and what is the meaning of Greece today? We will speak about our country but with plays not exclusively of our country.’<sup>522</sup> The program included many contemporary plays by Greek playwrights, as well as Greek works from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, the *Odyssey* directed by Bob Wilson, Renaissance works with Greek themes, such as *Pericles* and *Amphitryon*, and of course, Attic drama. The clear goal was to renew the discussion on issues such as national identity and character, folk roots and current social pressures and transformations.

This exploration of the relationship to the past with the purpose of understanding who we are in the present was also a concern of independent theatre groups and young artists in the same period—perhaps due to the influence of the National Theatre’s agenda. Before looking at Greek tragedy specifically, it would be interesting to mention a memorable independent production from 2013 that explored folk roots and traditions, within the collective Greek sense of the past and national identity. *Hellen Vrykolax (Greek Vampire)*, by *boulouki* theatre group, was a poetic and at times subtly humorous dramatization of Greek vampire stories, taken from literary and other sources from medieval times to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It explored Greek folk traditions in an unexpected and thoroughly contemporary way, beginning as a formalist, site-specific performance of high aesthetic value at the Benaki Museum in Athens in 2013 and touring Greece for a year. Dressed in beautifully detailed traditional costumes in a white-grey colour palette, the three performers ‘haunted’ the museum, interacting with the ancient and Byzantine exhibits. Although the success of the production was mainly due to its high aesthetics, a

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<sup>521</sup> Patsalidis (2014b).

<sup>522</sup> *To Vima* Newspaper (2011).

connecting thread through the stories was discernible: the tension in the transition between the age of legend and superstition to the modern age of reason. At the same time, the production's visual and aural language provided a powerful re-framing of our collective notions regarding folk elements such as traditional costume, oral poetry, demotic song and rural customs. The performance was so well-received that it was repeated for a second year.

Young creators' turn to Attic drama, which is the nexus of modern Greek theatrical exploration of identity, is the subject of my next section.

### **5. From fringe to Epidauros: a younger generation's guide to tragic revivals.**

It was a watershed moment when in 2104 Giorgos Loukos, the former director of the Greek Festival,<sup>523</sup> opened the festival gates to young artists who introduced a boldly different approach to Greek drama, in some cases bringing the hallmarks of the experimental and fringe theatre scene of Athens to the most massively attended theatrical event of the year. Although we don't know if under the new director this policy will continue, the festival will never be the same.

In this section I will attempt to identify some shared characteristics, techniques and focal points in Greek drama productions by the younger generation, always bearing in mind their impact on treatments of the chorus. The following observations are not meant to be exhaustive or applicable to all, but they do represent some powerful recurring tendencies.

#### **i. The blurring of lines: tragicomedy.**

According to J.L. Styan, one of the principal achievements of great modern dramatists is 'is to make the audience suffer without the relief of tears and to make it mock without a true relief of laughter. The audience remains at a distance, yet within immediate call; impersonal, yet strangely involved.'<sup>524</sup> Styan, who coined the phrase 'dark comedy', a play that 'sours the laughter and redoubles the emotion',<sup>525</sup> points out

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<sup>523</sup> Loukos was director of the Greek festival from 2006 to 2015. During his tenure policies of admission to the festival changed, with high-profile productions from abroad and more experimental approaches included in the programming. Loukos also inaugurated a new festival venue in Athens, Pireos 206, which has hosted some of the most exciting companies from Greece and abroad, such as Théâtre du Soleil and Societas Raffaello Sanzio.

<sup>524</sup> Styan (1962) 260.

<sup>525</sup> Styan (1962) 282.

that this ambivalence is a much more effective mirror of human nature.<sup>526</sup> While this is one of the fundamental components of contemporary theatre since Modernity, for decades the taboo surrounding Attic drama did not allow it to be applied to tragedy—in modern Greece but also elsewhere. As Revermann notes, the pervasive seriousness of 20<sup>th</sup>-century reception of Greek drama should not feel natural, at least to a classicist: ‘we have ample evidence [...] that tragic themes and individual plays were constantly made fun of by tragedy’s ugly rival and misbehaving sister, comedy.’<sup>527</sup> On the same topic, Foley points out that ‘considering tragedy as serious or *spoudaios*...does not mean that tragic performance necessarily precluded additional elements of hubris, parody or satire.’<sup>528</sup>

Some contemporary directors of Greek tragedy have introduced the blurring of lines between tragic and comic tone as a dramaturgical technique. When done well, using comic elements effectively in tragedy today is much more than comic relief, satire or simple ‘deconstruction’. It is a complex dramaturgical device that ensures the audience stays intellectually alert and avoids preconceptions, while also recognizing and identifying with the world of the play. It is similar to the technique of modern playwrights who actively seek to avoid genre stereotypes in order to keep the audience alert.<sup>529</sup>

Foley has also stressed the importance of tragicomedy and the theatre of the absurd as ‘forms of serious modern and post-modern drama that wrestle with important metaphysical issues’ on how we perceive and perform classical drama today.<sup>530</sup> The three directors whose work is discussed in the following paragraphs, and who were all in their 20s or 30s when their productions participated in the Greek Festival, were clearly influenced by these forms, as well as by the Brechtian legacy of distancing and critical attitude towards dramatic ‘heroes’: they employed the dramaturgical device of blurring genre lines in order to revitalize our relationship to the original text. Furthermore, all three productions share a childlike quality in the acting and mise-en-scène, and have many similarities in their visual worlds, with minimal sets and costumes that nostalgically evoke school children of the 1950s.

The pseudo-Eudipidean *Rhesus*, directed by Katerina Evaggelatos, was staged as a site-specific promenade production in Aristotle’s Lyceum in Athens in 2015 with a

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<sup>526</sup> Styan (1962) 270.

<sup>527</sup> Revermann (2008) 105.

<sup>528</sup> Foley (2010) 140.

<sup>529</sup> Styan (1962) 267.

<sup>530</sup> Foley (2010) 140.

youthful cast, many of them recent graduates of the National Theatre Drama School.<sup>531</sup> Its tragicomic tone was clearly part of its appeal to the director:

It is certainly not a tragedy. It contains elements of satyr play, comedy bordering on parody, but also drama. For us, it is rather an anti-war satire using the *Iliad* as its vehicle [...] One could say that it is an unusual mixture of theatrical genres, completely innovative for its time.<sup>532</sup>

This generic ‘freedom’, the director claims, led her to see it as a children’s game from another era, or a dream.<sup>533</sup> To this end she included in the text passages from Aristotle’s treatise *On Dreams* (Περὶ ἐνυπνίων) and, as she states in her directors’ note, conceived of the whole performance ‘as Hector’s dream during the troubled night after his victorious battle against the Greeks. A dream that transforms the heroes of the Trojan War into children playing war in an archaeological site [...] it starts with comedy it ends in tragedy: the nostalgic feeling of a children’s game [...] is transformed into a nightmarish vision of raw reality that reveals death and violence.’<sup>534</sup> So, instead of a chorus and protagonists, we have an ensemble of children playing, in a directorial concept interested in the transitions between dream and reality, past and present.

The feeling of a group of children (or young people) ‘playing at’ becoming the characters was again part of the directorial concept of Euripides’ *Helen* directed by 26-year old Dimitris Karantzas, that opened the 2014 Epidauros festival.<sup>535</sup> This director was also fascinated by the play’s generic ambiguity and saw in it elements of ‘tragedy, farce and existential drama that is almost quotidian.’<sup>536</sup> At the same time, the goal was to capitalize on the feelings of unease and bafflement that the play leaves with the spectators at the end. What is the truth? Is this a happy ending or not? Is Helen guilty or is she an innocent victim? These questions remain open in Karantzas’ interpretation.

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<sup>531</sup> Euripides’(?) *Rhesus*, translated by Kostas Topouzis, directed/dramaturgy by Katerina Evaggelatos, choreography by Patricia Apergi, costumes by Vassiliki Syrma, music by Lefteris Veniadis, lighting design by Giorgos Tellos and Stella Kaltsou, sound design by Costas Michalopoulos, collaborating architect: Ilya Tasioula, producer: Giorgos Lykiardopoulos. Co-produced by the Greek festival and Lykofos productions.

<sup>532</sup> Greek Festival 2016.

<sup>533</sup> Greek Festival 2016.

<sup>534</sup> Greek Festival 2016.

<sup>535</sup> Euripides’ *Helen*, translated by Dimitris Dimitriadis, directed by Dimitris Karantzas, set and costume design by Ioanna Tsami, movement by Stavroula Siamou, Music by Henri Kergomard, lighting design by Alekos Anastasiou, produced by the Greek Festival.

<sup>536</sup> Dimadi (2014).

This technique of group narration and ensemble staging was employed throughout. For example, Helen's first monologue was delivered as a chorus by the nine-member cast. Individual characters did not exist: almost everyone took turns to be Helen, with characters constantly emerging from the chorus and returning to it. The ensemble members began by trying to justify the heroine and ended up being unsure about her innocence. They used irony, distancing and breaking the dramatic illusion. For example, they often addressed the audience to say: 'The chorus says...'

In the 2014 *Prometheus Bound*, directed by Ektoras Lygizos, it was entirely clear from the costumes that the characters were school children, in grey pleated skirts, shorts, neck-ties and white socks.<sup>537</sup> The mise-en-scène once again explored the technique of ensemble casting and group delivery: there were eight narrators standing around a large wooden effigy of Prometheus that dominated the orchestra, telling the story as a group. According to the director, they were observing Prometheus, at times taking on the roles in order to examine his condition.<sup>538</sup>

One of the actors, Stephania Goulioti, who shared the title role with the director, puts into words something that all three productions have in common: the dialectical relationship to the material, which in the case of *Prometheus* takes its most extreme form, since even the title character is conceived as being 'in conversation with himself' and is portrayed by two actors, a male and a female.

This is a more honest way to approach [tragedy]. Because up until now we only saw actors trying to approach these great sizes, which in reality cannot be reached and the only thing you can do is have an open dialogue with them and this is what contemporary productions of Greek drama are trying to do. In this idea of a group narration [...] we are in relationship to [the material], constantly energized and in open communication with the thing which we are narrating. Which is not possible in simple depiction/mimesis.<sup>539</sup>

So there is a huge shift from the previous generation's aesthetic in the characterization of tragic heroes: the tragic protagonist is brought down to the human level, while the 'larger-than-life' quality is viewed with suspicion, and as incompatible with the new acting

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<sup>537</sup> Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, translated by Panayiotis Moullas, adapted and directed by Ektoras Lygizos, set and costume design by Cleo Boboti, lighting design by Dimitris Kasimatis, produced by the Greek Festival.

<sup>538</sup> Elculture.gr (2014).

<sup>539</sup> Elculture.gr (2014).

style.<sup>540</sup> In *Rhesus* the heroes of the Trojan War are children playing, in *Helen* the distancing effect of the tragicomic narration casts doubts on the characters' pathos and emotional honesty, while in *Prometheus Bound* the director is interested in emphasizing the protagonists' and the chorus' human dimension, while simultaneously deconstructing them through double casting.<sup>541</sup> This approach, heretofore unthinkable in Greece, reveals disillusionment with the ideas of the previous generation that 'heroism' and 'decorum', are necessary components of Attic drama.<sup>542</sup>

The challenge these young artists pose to traditional certainties through their exploration of generic boundaries perhaps in some respect brings them closer to the spirit of the original: as Foley, Goldhill and others observe, 'tragedy did not aim primarily to promulgate a universalising world view', but rather its aim was to 'represent conflicts and contradictions.'<sup>543</sup>

Their shared sense that generic ambiguity is a sign of sophisticated dramaturgy is perhaps the reason that lead these directors to choose liminal, enigmatic plays, such as *Helen* and *Rhesus*, but also a play like *Prometheus*, whose authorship has been contested and its 'monolithic' dramaturgy often found challenging. The non-traditional directorial approaches that such texts can inspire, whether through their hybridity or their 'ancientness', are seen by the artists as more suited to contemporary theatre aesthetic.

But this interest in liminal plays may also be connected to the second point I want to make about this generation of artists: the pervasive sense of *pessimism* that is often put forth as an antithesis to previous interpretations of these texts and as socio-political commentary.

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<sup>540</sup> Another example of this awkwardness in the face of 'tragic grandeur' and 'great tragic heroes' is Sophocles' *Ajax* directed by Martha Frintzila (Baumstrasse theatre company, 2014), in which the main character is not played by an actor, but portrayed as a human-sized shadow puppet in the style of Karagiozis shadow theatre.

<sup>541</sup> The director describes this approach as follows: 'He cries and laments like he doesn't know what will come, like a human being. We saw the Oceanides like a normal person with a normal character development.' (Elculture.gr: 2014)

<sup>542</sup> Sidiropoulou notes that 'it is no surprise that the monumental stature of tragedy, with its larger-than-life characters and the representation of forces beyond human comprehension, has in one way or another become a powerful medium for artists to comment on the absence of grandeur and heroics today.'

(Sidiropoulou 2014a, p. 13).

<sup>543</sup> Foley (2010) 138.

## ii. Pessimism: no justice, no progress, no catharsis

The generic ambiguity of the plays discussed above is seen by the directors as a meta-dramatic comment on human confusion and inability to distinguish right from wrong, while the ambiguous Euripidean endings that do not provide closure are considered more suited to today's social and moral chaos.<sup>544</sup> In Evaggelatos's *Rhesus* the dream ends in a nightmare, the children's game becomes harsh violent reality. Similarly, the notion of futility and moral ambiguity runs through Karatzas' *Helen*.

Revermann notes that revivals of Greek tragedy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were often 'a means of articulating [...] social transformation, functioning as a positive, beneficial and constructive artistic and political force.'<sup>545</sup> 20<sup>th</sup>-century artists have regularly transformed Greek tragic dystopia into utopia, in order to advocate 'radical sociopolitical transformation.'<sup>546</sup> By contrast, the 21<sup>st</sup>-century artists discussed here are moving away from this optimistic reading of tragedy, having lost faith in social justice. Perhaps this is the reason why many new generation directors choose the ambiguity of Euripides, the playwright whose dateable plays from 431 onwards are documents of the decline of Athens and the disastrous consequences of the Peloponnesian War.

Even in the case of Aeschylean revivals, some directorial concepts completely subvert traditional readings, in order to put forth a clearly pessimistic ending, reflecting what they see as the moral chaos and confusion of their time. One such example is the independent company Helter Skelter and director Thanos Papakonstantinou. In 2012-13 the first two parts of their adaptation of the *Oresteia* under the general title *Carnage* were positively received.<sup>547</sup> Papakonstantinou, in his mid-thirties at the time, was also the author of the pieces. In *Carnage* the *Oresteia* proceeds backwards, in what the author-director sees as the opposite of the Aeschylean proposal of social evolution. The David Lynch-inspired *Venison* (2012),<sup>548</sup> based on *Eumenides*, foregrounded the theme of mental illness,<sup>549</sup> while the 2013 ritualistic *Pedestal*,<sup>550</sup> based on *Choephoroi*, presented a

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<sup>544</sup> See Evaggelatos (2016).

<sup>545</sup> Revermann (2008) 105.

<sup>546</sup> Revermann (2008) 106.

<sup>547</sup> See Kaltaki (2012 and 2013). Following the success of *Carnage* Papakonstantinou was invited to direct *Metatopisi pros to Erythro* at the 2014 Greek Festival.

<sup>548</sup> Concept-text-direction: Thanos Papakonstantinou, dramaturgy partner: Tzortzina Kakoudaki, set-costume design: Dimitra Liakoura, movement: Chara Kotsali, sound composition: Antonis Moras, lighting design: Christina Thanassoula, videos-graphic design: Konstantinos Chaidalis, animal sculpture: Pariklis Pravitas.

<sup>549</sup> See Kaltaki (2012)

<sup>550</sup> Concept, Set, Script, Direction: Thanos Papakonstantinou, cooperation in Dramaturgy: Georgina Kakoudaki, scenery, Costumes: Niki Psychogiou, movement Direction: Hara Kotsali, sound design:



dark vision of oppressive family relationships.<sup>551</sup> According to *Carnage*, humans are regressing to animal instincts and violence, society is evolving backwards to a dark age of conservatism, and democracy is collapsing while people take the law into their own hands.<sup>552</sup>

In this atmosphere, the chorus cannot be a benign element representing the wisdom of the community. In *Carnage*, the ‘chorus’, if we can call it that, becomes a form that introduces surreal elements in the *mise-en-scène* or provides a glimpse of the imaginary life of the characters: in *Venison* three ‘nurses’ torment the mentally ill Orestes, while in *Pedestal* three men in the Daughter’s imagination perform strange rituals of initiation.

### iii. Ensemble acting and individuality: rethinking traditional casting hierarchies.

With casts of ten (*Rhesus*), nine (*Helen*), eight (*Prometheus*) and five (*Carnage*), the productions discussed above are clearly operating on a different scale and with a different budget than the standard Greek Festival productions. Above all, there is no sign of the fifteen-member dancing and singing chorus which audiences have grown accustomed to. It has been replaced by the ensemble or evolved into something else entirely. Ensemble acting dictates a more egalitarian casting and also may result in more individuality among chorus members. For example, in *Prometheus Bound*, the two actresses who portrayed the chorus of Oceanids had distinguishable characters: one of them was afraid, the other less so.<sup>553</sup>

More than a practical necessity, this may also be a clear political stance taken against the standard procedures of Greek drama production, as expressed for example by Dimitris Karantzas, the director of the 2014 *Helen*: ‘In our performance all actors play all characters. Because we—and of course not the famous Helen—are the true, unseen hero.’ It is significant that the 25 to 35 year-old cast members were among the ‘unknown’ protagonists of the so-called experimental theatre scene.<sup>554</sup>

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Antonis Moras, lighting design: Christina Thanassoula, video- graphic Design: Konstantinos Chaidalis, sculpture: Katerina Andreou, production: The Helter Skelter Company, 2013.

<sup>551</sup> At the time of writing this thesis, the third part of the trilogy, entitled *Colossus* and based on *Agamemnon*, has not yet been produced.

<sup>552</sup> Tigkaraki (2013). See also Kaltaki (2012).

<sup>553</sup> See Elculture.gr (2104).

<sup>554</sup> Dimadi (2014).

Tragedy's perennial ability to make stars out of the performers, by giving prominence to the heroic individual and hence the star actor performing it, can be problematic for directors 'with an egalitarian agenda.'<sup>555</sup> Revermann gives the example of Richard Schechner who, in *Dionysus Since 69*, tried to overcome this by having all members of the troupe rotate roles according to a pattern, which was displayed in the programme, with each actor having been assigned at least two individual roles. Additionally, the actors were 'fully centered [...] in the collective qua performing as a chorus member.'<sup>556</sup> Something similar is happening in Greece at the moment, on a broad scale. Most of the younger generation artists this chapter focuses on have had the experience of performing in a chorus, during their time in drama school and soon after in some of the big state theatre productions. According to the established hierarchies, they would now have to wait through many years of performing in the chorus or in smaller parts, before they would get leading tragic roles—if they ever did.<sup>557</sup> The lead roles would go to big-name actors (famous either from TV or from high-profile theatre careers) while the chorus would be cast based on dancing and singing abilities rather than individuality or acting skill. Thus, the reason for a young performer to participate in the chorus would be mainly financial, although typically they would get paid less than the leads. But nowadays, young creators are searching for something more meaningful in their approach to the choral form and content. The Greek festival has been opened to them, giving them a platform and validating their aesthetics, on an equal footing as celebrity actors and directors. Secondly, as independent theatre artists in the current economic climate, they have had to learn how to produce work with limited financial means and a collective structure to production. Many independent companies have a core of people who work together permanently or semi-permanently, sharing the artistic and managerial positions among them. This model immediately reframes traditional casting hierarchies and rehearsal planning and makes a new approach to the chorus ideologically necessary. The fact that this production model, with its concurrent aesthetics, is now part of the Epidauros repertoire, marks an exciting turning point.

In the 2016 Greek festival, another participation by a group of young artists raises similar issues: Momentum Art Company, under the direction of 27-year-old Argyris

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<sup>555</sup> Revermann (2008) 110.

<sup>556</sup> Revermann (2008) 111.

<sup>557</sup> See Lalioti (2002) 116 on young actors' experience of participating in the chorus of a National Theatre of Greece production of *Lysistrata*.

Pantazaras, presented *Metropolis: chorus and messenger from ancient drama*, a co-production of the National Theatre and the Greek Festival. The text drew from messenger speeches in some of the most frequently performed tragedies, and also used the choral form in the *mise-en-scène*. The structure of the performance was once more based on an ‘egalitarian’ ensemble and the political undertone of the production, inspired by the global refugee crisis, was obvious in its imagery and its characterization as: ‘a prayer for a lost country.’<sup>558</sup> The characters were “Anonymous, witnesses of [...] the fall of civilizations, ideas, peoples and kingdoms. Exiled from life, wandering hermits, the exorcise history [...] They whisper a chorus, a collective ‘song’ through their stories and they look for their own metropolis.”<sup>559</sup> The National Theatre website describes the production as ‘a treatment of [...] a dark era and a human chorus about the fall and the miracle.’<sup>560</sup> In ‘mainstream’ productions of tragedy the chorus and the messenger are the roles in which these young performers would normally expect to be cast. These roles, as theorists and practitioners know very well, give a voice to the ‘oppressed, marginalized and under-privileged.’<sup>561</sup> *Metropolis* takes this a step further, by casting the roles of chorus and messenger as the only survivors after the fall of civilization, after the death of kings, elevating their anonymity to the status of a collective of survivors with authority and experience that have the potential to redefine humanity’s relationship with history—just as they are redefining their relationship to the original plays, and to society as a whole: their company’s mission is described as ‘re-examining civilization and its values.’<sup>562</sup>

When it comes to Greek drama revivals, Hardwick points out that the pursuit of innovation in the adaptation of the text or in the directorial concept (which often involves extensive dramaturgical interventions) sometimes leads artists to be ‘more interested in the myth as narrative than in the [original] text or the conventions of Greek drama.’ Thus, they may miss a whole layer of meaning which has to do with that text’s dialectic relationship with what has come before, its ‘genealogies’.<sup>563</sup> We might say that some of the productions discussed in this section fall into this category. Another concern that arises is that some of them, by jettisoning theatrical conventions that feel antiquated without attempting to engage with them creatively, lose out on the full impact and

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<sup>558</sup> From the production’s press release, available at Culturenow.gr (2016).

<sup>559</sup> From the production’s press release, available at Culturenow.gr (2016).

<sup>560</sup> National Theatre of Greece (2016).

<sup>561</sup> Hardwick (2010) 203.

<sup>562</sup> From the production’s press release, available at Culturenow.gr (2016).

<sup>563</sup> Hardwick (2010) 359.

meaning of the play.

In the next section I will look at the work of a company who emerged from the experimental, independent theatre scene, but whose original work earned them a place in the Epidaurus festival with a memorable production of *Orestes* in 2015. Horos theatre company shares many of the aesthetic and political goals of the companies discussed here, as well as some of the practical limitations. But their approach to tragedy, although ‘experimental’, reveals a close engagement with the form, content and context of the original. Their exploration of the place of folk tradition in contemporary Greek poetics is also exemplary, since it is framed with high aesthetic values and based on thorough research and extensive field work.

## **6. *Orestes* by Horos theatre company**

### **i. The company**

Theatre theorist Dimitris Tsatsoulis describes Horos Theatre company as ‘one of these companies whose each new production is a significant, eagerly anticipated artistic event [...] Constantly experimental, their productions are also marked by high professionalism.’<sup>564</sup> Part of the reason why the company is so well respected and their productions anticipated by the theatre community with such eagerness is that they have developed their own theatrical language, based on years of research and practice, while their tendency for innovation is combined with a desire to learn from tradition and to illuminate the deepest meanings of the plays. An essential part of this process is returning to the same text more than once, creating multiple versions of the same performance over a number of years and for many diverse locations. Their high aesthetics, polished presentation, references to Asian theatre traditions and rigorous physical style owe a much to the fact that the director, Simos Kakalas, was a student of Terzopoulos, and also studied the techniques of Jacques Lecoq and Balinese theatre.

In 2003, Thessaloniki native Simos Kakalas decided to found a theatre company as a travelling troupe of players, with the long-term goal of creating a triptych of productions corresponding to three key moments in Greek dramatic literature that had been formative in the construction for contemporary Greek identity. The plays he planned

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<sup>564</sup> Tsatsoulis (2016).

to produce and direct were *Golfo* by Spyridon Peresiades,<sup>565</sup> *Erophili* by Georgios Hortatsis<sup>566</sup> and *Orestes* by Euripides, in a translation by Yiannis Tsarouchis. Thirteen years later the triptych is completed and as of 2016 Horos Theatre Company has a permanent performance space in Athens.

The ethics of production discussed in the previous section are exemplified by a company like Horos. Kakalas works with a small troupe with tight production deadlines, always with a core of permanent collaborators, thus ensuring that people get paid for their work.<sup>567</sup> The aesthetic capitalizes on the actor and avoids expensive sets or complicated technology—their touring schedule also dictates a minimal approach in those areas. Furthermore, as we will see below, when the director speaks about the plays in interviews, or when introducing the play to the audience, we get a strong sense that his politics and the ethics of the production are aligned with the content and form of the plays.

## ii. The folk element and Greek roots

In the previous sections I examined the evolution of the use of folk elements in revivals of Greek drama in Greece, noting the discourse on authenticity and identity that accompanied that trend. At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century such approaches were beginning to look dated and hollow, since they were no longer perceived to have a legitimate claim on authenticity and since they failed to renew their form and aesthetics. At the same time, the influence of postmodernism and iconoclastic, auteur approaches to Greek drama brought new theatrical trends to the mainstream. However, Simos Kakalas and his company are among those who feel that through the widespread emulation of a central European theatre aesthetic, often ‘undigested’, the connection to roots and identity has been cast aside completely. Without the foundation of self-knowledge, many theatre productions are simply superficial imitations of fashionable European forms.<sup>568</sup>

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<sup>565</sup> *Golfo* (1893) is one of the most well-loved and frequently performed Greek pastoral melodramas, written in Iambic Decapentasyllabic verse.

<sup>566</sup> *Erophili* by Georgios Hortatsis: one of the better-known works of Cretan Renaissance literature, a tragedy written at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century in the Cretan idiom, in iambic Decapentasyllabic verse, with the exception of the choral odes which are written in eleven-syllable verses. The main source texts of the play are *Orbecche* by G. Battista Giraldi (1549), and *Il Re Torrismondo* by T. Tasso (1587). The source for the choral odes is Seneca’s *Phaedra*.

<sup>567</sup> The core of the company are Simos Kakalas (director, actor) Elena Mavridou (actor, dramaturg) and Demetra Kouza (actor). For each production, the company may collaborate with one or two additional performers who will be quickly introduced to the methodology and technique of the group. (see Appendix pp.256-57)

<sup>568</sup> See Appendix, p.256.

As we saw in the previous section, in the theatre scene of depression Greece, the question ‘who we are’ returns with urgency and the connection with folk roots enters a new phase. The work of Horos Theatre company is one of the best examples of this new search for authenticity and identity. Through a decade of touring and performing anywhere from community centers to beaches, they built a creative and genuine relationship with the Greek countryside.<sup>569</sup> Kakalas’ exploration of roots and what he calls the *laikon* element is influenced by the famous Greek painter Yiannis Tsarouchis (1910-1989), whose life-long pursuit of promoting the folk roots of contemporary Greek identity informs his work as a painter, scenographer and writer, as well as his approach to Greek drama, in which pompous nationalistic claims are rejected. Like Tsarouchis and Karolos Koun, Kakalas is fascinated by the power of the popular shadow theatre Karagiozis as well as by all living folk performance or literary traditions. For example, when working on *Erophili*, the company spent a year researching the decapentasyllabic verse and the vibrant, living tradition of oral poetry in Crete, before coming up with their own method of the theatrical delivery of this metre. In terms of the visual world, the work of Horos is inspired by the simplicity of Tsarouchis, and re-visits the folk element with a high aesthetic. In this context, the *laikon* as a term acquires a slightly different, broader meaning than simply ‘folk’: it encompasses folk traditions as well as the popular, demotic and diachronic elements of everyday life of the people of Greece, in the city or in the countryside: Kakalas is looking for identity in the quotidian and authenticity in cultural heritage. As a general note, we might say that instead of incorporating folk elements in a version of tragedy-as-the-highest-art-form best expressed in the ideologically charged context of the Epidaurus festival, the director is searching for the *laikon* element in everyday rituals as well as in Greek folk theatre traditions and literary forms that sometimes override the narrative or provide a parallel, visual narrative to the text. This change of direction permeates the entire performance of *Orestes* and of course starts with the translation. Tsarouchis’ prose translation was chosen for its demotic idiom, its directness and the non-heroic style that seeks to avoid the declamatory tone of older poetic translations: these aesthetic choices reflect the translator’s rejection of nationalistic relationship with the past, of a notion of tragedy as a holy legacy, the ‘theatre of our

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<sup>569</sup> See Appendix, p.257-58.

forefathers', which Tsarouchis calls 'a portrait that we buy from the thrift shop to show that we have ancestors.'<sup>570</sup>

Furthermore, during the years of touring the countryside and being influenced by the 'rules' and traditions of folk theatre, Horos theatre company have developed a direct and comfortable relationship with the audience as part of their methodology. For example, at the opening of the 2016 *Orestes*, in keeping with his view of Greek drama as a tool for democracy, Kakalas spoke to the audience introducing the play and the production's particular political focus.<sup>571</sup>

### iii. Horos and the chorus

In 2012, the critically acclaimed *Erophili Synopsis* by Horos performed at the Cacoyiannis Foundation in Athens.<sup>572</sup> This was the final version of a performance which began in 2008 in Crete.<sup>573</sup> A successful presentation at the Small Epidaurus theatre followed, for the 2010 Greek Festival.<sup>574</sup> The 2012 closed-space version of this six-person Renaissance tragedy with a full female chorus was reduced to its essential elements: a three-person 'synopsis' performance using masks and physical theatre, detailed work on the text and an enhanced political message that reflected the escalating crisis in Greek society. A sense of ritual was created through the palpable emotional and physical connection among the actresses, the use of the mask that had an almost sacred quality to it, and also through the soundscape, that immersed the audience into this atmospheric retelling of *Erophili*. Each night at the end of the performance, after the evil King's triumphant monologue, the director spoke to the audience through the sound system, breaking the spell:

Normally at this point the chorus of the play revolts against the King, attacking and killing him. But because today the people do not rise up,

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<sup>570</sup> Tsarouchis (1989) 52.

<sup>571</sup> See also Charalambidou (2015).

<sup>572</sup> *erophili synopsis—A performance based on the masterpiece by Georgios Hortatsis*.

A production by Horos Theatre Company in co-operation with Athens and Epidaurus Festival  
 Direction - Set Design: Simos Kakalas, Adaptation: Elena Mavridou, Music: Nikos Veliotis, Masks: Martha Foka, Light Design: Periklis Mathiellis, Sound Design: George Mavridis, Assistant Director: Dimitris Kalakidis, Voice Training: Athina Trevlia, Literary Consultant: Natalia Deligiannaki, Production Manager: Stella Teneketzi, Actors: Dimitra Kouza, Dimitra, Larentzaki, Elena Mavridou.

<sup>573</sup> Details in the Appendix, pp.323-5.

<sup>574</sup> Directed by Simos Kakalas, adaptation by Margarita Krana, set and costumes by Martha Foka, movement by Demetris Soteriou, lighting by Pericles Mathiellis. Dramaturgical advisor: Natalia Deligiannaki. Cast: Simos Kakalas, Demetra Kouza, Elena Mavridou, Yiannos Perlegkas, Christos Sapountzis. Musicians: Kostis Kyritsakis, Christos Barbas, Yiannis Papadopoulos, Haris Porfyrides.

there is no punishment for those in power. Thus our performance ends here.  
(my translation)

The political comment is of course related to the sense of extreme injustice committed against the Greek people during the crisis—an injustice that went unpunished. In an interview given in 2012, Kakalas comments on the dramaturgical choice of not having a chorus: ‘These three women are what remains of the chorus of Erophili. Since today creating a chorus of people is very difficult [...] since the more globalized the world becomes, and the more the concept of a united Europe, a united planet, a united humanity, becomes established, we see that, instead, people get broken up into smaller and smaller groups. There is fear of this [belonging to a collective, being united]. So first of all, as a director, I thought it was rather impossible to create a chorus, i.e. a group of people who have a common voice, common thoughts and a common goal.’<sup>575</sup> These comments reveal an engagement with what the collective choral presence means in political terms, which was further explored in the 2016 *Orestes*. Naturally, the reduction of the size of the chorus is not unrelated to the economics of Horos’ productions, which rely on a small and tight ensemble of long-term collaborators. But the practical limitations are only reflections of a larger crisis that has made the presence of a collective on stage problematic—or at least in need of redefinition. Kakalas’ many years of experience as actor and assistant director in the big-budget Greek drama productions of the National Theatre of Northern Greece, which usually include the full dancing, singing, and at times mask-wearing chorus, repeated every summer as an empty shell, have lead him to explore something more essential and contemporary in the choral form.<sup>576</sup>

#### iv. Exploring theatrical convention: Euripides, *Orestes* and Horos.

It is significant and appropriate that for the conclusion of the twelve-year cycle of research and exploration of Greek dramatic literature Kakalas chose this late mature play of Euripides, which explores dramatic techniques, pushes the limits of form and pursues experimentations in terms of convention with a bravado unmatched in extant tragedy.<sup>577</sup> The pursuit of stylistic virtuosity and innovation by Euripides, finds a parallel in the performance of Horos. In the final 2016 version of the play the company, comfortable in

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<sup>575</sup> Tsavalou (2012).

<sup>576</sup> See Appendix pp.256-57.

<sup>577</sup> See for example Zeitlin (1980) and Arnott (1973).



their technique and ensemble dynamic, push the limits of the idiosyncratic stage idioms that they developed over the years.<sup>578</sup> The director keeps surprising us with stylistic variety and extreme contrasts in tonality, just as in *Orestes* Euripides keeps us on our toes with a plot that constantly overturns our expectations of the familiar myth, as well as by manipulating well-known conventions and genre patterns.<sup>579</sup> Mask work, physical work and strong ensemble coordination, the basic components of Horos' theatrical language for over a decade, remain the basic building blocks, but what gradually unfolds as we watch Kakalas' *Orestes* is an astonishing stylistic mosaic, marked by a tendency to expose theatrical conventions.<sup>580</sup> In addition to this meta-theatrical quality we have an interchange between the strict stylization required for mask work, and naturalism in the acting code. For example, the stichomythia between Helen and Electra is delivered as if acting for camera, with masks removed, voices almost devoid of emotion, in a naturalistic study of subtext and irony. To complete the stylistic canvas, there are references to Japanese traditional theatre forms and finally, to the paintings of Yiannis Tsarouchis. In previous versions, a copy of a painting by Tsarouchis was part of the set design. In the final version, this homage leads to the choreographic moments such as the traditional *zeimbekiko* dance, and almost improvised naturalistic moments that seem to break the flow of the play, as we shall see below.

#### v. Horos' Masks

In a play with an unusually large cast and multiple entrances and exits within the epeisodia, performed by only four actors, virtuosity in the use of the mask becomes the centrepiece of the production. In this production Horos go a step further by drawing attention to the conventions in the use of the mask, which had reached an aesthetic and technical peak in *Erophili synopsis*.

The masks of Horos, always designed by Martha Foka, have over the years incorporated influences from Asian theatre, Japanese manga and Renaissance masks. By

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<sup>578</sup> Experimentation is a well-known phenomenon in the performance history of *Orestes*. Foley claims that she does not know 'of a single American production of *Orestes*, from the 1968 and 1973 productions at Berkeley [...] that has not been at least partly absurdist or postmodern. From a modern perspective, it seems almost impossible to do otherwise.' (Foley (2010) 148).

<sup>579</sup> See Zeitlin (1980).

<sup>580</sup> Tsatsoulis (2016) notes that this διακαλλιτεχνικότητα (interdisciplinarity-the integration of several art forms) is a hallmark of Horos' work. It is also evident in their performance *To Telos* (2013, Onassis Cultural Center), which had abundant references to visual arts movements and artists, as well as in their successful manga-inspired *Golfo* (2004-2014) that ran for ten years and in several versions all over Greece.

the time we get to *Orestes*, the characters of the masks are drawn from a recognizably Greek canvas, while the physical theatre technique is influenced by the work of Jacques Lecoq and Balinese theatre.<sup>581</sup> Vocal and physical specificity on the part of the actors helped them achieve complete and distinctive transformations, to the point that it became difficult to distinguish which of the four performers was behind the mask.<sup>582</sup>

## vi. Politics

*Ορέστης: δεινὸν οἱ πολλοί, κακούργους ὅταν ἔχωσι προστάτας.* (Eur. *Or.* 772)

For Horos, *Orestes* is a study of the behavior of the mob, in a malfunctioning democratic system, but also a reflection on the fate of an angry younger generation, and perhaps of a whole people, who have been pushed to their limits by a corrupt and chaotic system and are now lashing out.<sup>583</sup> The decay of democratic foundations such as the ecclesia is another focal point of the production: the messenger's account of Orestes' trial couldn't be more relevant for contemporary Greek politics. As democratic foundations crumble, nothing seems to make sense, and since *Orestes* turns expectations and the entire mythological tradition on its head, it is the perfect play for Horos to produce at this moment.

The refugee crisis is also a part of Kakalas' recontextualization of *Orestes*, manifest mostly in the scenography: the set is extremely minimal, with black paneling to create a palace door and a few stools for the actors. The only prop that remains in this final draft of *Orestes* are several life-size fabric puppets inundating the stage floor: a reminder of the human cost of the global economic catastrophe, and especially of the bodies washed out on beaches: 'these puppets are the bodies, the bodies that today are everywhere we look.'<sup>584</sup>

## vii. Tragicomedy

In general, the performance fluctuates between comic mood and a darker tone. The intensity and seriousness of the performers, especially when they are not wearing the mask, coupled with the ever-present, ominous soundscape by Mohammad, contributes to

<sup>581</sup> See Appendix p.257-58.

<sup>582</sup> On the virtuosity in the use of the mask see Tsatsoulis (2015).

<sup>583</sup> See Karderinis (2015).

<sup>584</sup> See Appendix p.255.

the darkness and to a sense of ritual. But, in contrast to the atmospheric *Erophili*, here the director boldly employs tragicomedy, and at times, for example in the Phrygian's scene, clear comic relief and parody: these elements introduce ambiguity into the moral universe of the play, by always reversing our expectations about what the real stakes are in this plot and where our sympathy should lie: for example, the readiness with which the protagonists accept Pylades' scheme to kill Helen and take Hermione hostage caused laughter among the audience, especially because Orestes kept repeating the grotesque *gestus* of slitting someone's throat, which he had also used in the *agon* when describing the murder of Clytemnestra. At the same time Pylades' physical language in combination with the mask becomes at this point strongly evocative of a recognizable type of a very violent, angry young man: images of demonstrations, of street fights, of football stadiums, of young neo-nazis, all come up in our mind through this one actor's physical expressivity. The much-discussed deconstruction of heroism in this play is reflected in this approach, but at the same time the director's political point comes through powerfully: through our laughter we are also forced to confront our own present situation. The physical language and the use of the mask add a layer of interpretation which would have been perhaps too subtle in a different acting code.

Kakalas, like many other artists discussed here, is drawn to Euripidean irony and self-referentiality with relation to form, through a desire to challenge the dated, pompous and nationalistic interpretation of tragedy with a subversive sense of humour. The 'tragic' dimension is seen elsewhere, in the greater unresolved issues that tear our society apart. Blurring lines, deconstructing heroism and challenging happy endings, Kakalas, like others of his generation, avoids genre categorization and ultimately presents a darker view of the world.

#### **viii. The chorus in the 2016 *Orestes***

For the Epidauros version of this production, possibly because of the pressure of audience expectations created by that particular space, the solution was a large 'chorus' of students from two drama schools. They recreated a riot on stage and also used their smart phones to take photos of the *deus ex-machina* appearance of Apollo. These elements echoed contemporary events in a more literal way.

In the final, four-actor version of *Orestes*, with strong post-modern tendencies of stylistic pluralism as well as abstraction, the choral form became a challenge and an opportunity. Keeping in mind the chorus' original dynamic, Kakalas in *Orestes* turned it

into a vehicle for non-verbal storytelling using various techniques. The choral odes were reduced in size, but this was perhaps in keeping with Euripides' own awkwardness with the choral form in this play. Furthermore, there wasn't one all-encompassing approach in this chorus. Instead, the odes were seen as opportunities for a free-wheeling, total-theatre approach. But the result was always marked by high aesthetics.

For example, Euripides' meta-theatrical exploration of choral form and content in the parodos, when famously Electra asks the chorus to step softly and not to make too much noise, so as not to rouse Orestes ( lines 135-150), finds a parallel in the staging, which, in that moment, in contrast to the rest of the play, self-referentially combines specific traditional theatre forms from Ancient Greece and Japan: two actors wearing kothornoi and Noh masks enter to the sounds of one of the few surviving pieces of Ancient Greek music, which comes, as it happens, from a stasimon of Euripides' *Orestes*<sup>585</sup> adapted for this production by Mohammad. The effect of this contemporary combination of archaic elements is quite otherworldly— a reference to the ritual dimension of Greek drama perhaps, but also a comment on this 'sabotaged' parodos: they enter for a brief moment and exit walking backwards, disappearing quickly, just as they appeared, the choreography commenting on the Euripidean parodos that subverts itself.

The choral interventions within scenes, mostly a commentary on the action, were delivered directly to the audience and in a naturalistic mode of expression, by one of the actresses who had a more 'human' identity than the main characters because at that moment she was not wearing a mask. This had the effect of enhancing the meta-dramatic quality of the play as well as the sense of communion with the audience. Although it never materialized, the possibility of audience interaction felt like it was always within reach. Ultimately, we were invited to have a critical stance in relation to the events and to keep in mind the parallels with today.

Most of the odes, as transitions between scenes, became opportunities for the introduction of motifs inspired by the paintings of Tsarouchis. Some were immediately recognizable by the Greek audience, such as the stylized, almost ritualistic, version of *zeimbekiko*, performed by Pylades and Orestes as an exploration of the theme of male friendship that was so important to the translator.<sup>586</sup> The quotidian ritual of coffee divination replaced choral lyric in lines 807-843, which refers to the fate of the house of

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<sup>585</sup> *Orestes* 338-44, Vienna Papyrus G 2315 (Rainer inv. 8029), copied c. 200 BC. See West (1992) 277.

<sup>586</sup> Tsarouchis (1989) 68.

Atreus. The cast made and drank coffee on stage, studying the grains afterwards. This was another, more oblique reference to Tsarouchis, who admired such popular traditions, and also part of the context of the director's search for identity in the small things that unite the Greeks across time and place: the little gas heater, the sugar and coffee jars, the small cups and saucers, grounded the play into our own reality. The silent concentration of the performers also gave this quotidian moment a poetic quality. At the same time, the non-verbal story-telling in this moment perhaps reflected the ironic treatment of the issue of fate by Euripides, who in this play overturns well-known facts about the fate of the house of Atreus.<sup>587</sup>

### ix. Rituals

In this examination of the multiple functions of the choral form and how they 'translate' for a modern audience, we must include the strong sense of ritual that permeates the productions of Horos, including *Orestes*.

In a similar technique used for *Erophili Synopsis*, the actors entered without masks. They sat around the playing area and let a few moments go by, until a silent communication created a decision to put on the masks. This was the first in a series of 'rituals': of codes that the company share through years of working together, that enable them to create invisible interactions and dramatic transformations on stage. The sense of the actors participating in a ritual rather than showing us a ritual *theatrically re-enacted* also permeated the coffee-drinking scene, as well as the zeimbekiko dance. This sense of ritual was the framework, the shared code, in which all the seemingly incongruous stylistic elements of the production, including meta-theatricality, were able to be incorporated seamlessly.

## 7. Conclusion

The modern Greek 'success story' of the chorus is now at a turning point. We are currently going through a period in which traditional aesthetic forms and the ideologies that they represent are challenged. It is a painful process because it involves stripping down comfortable convictions and critically facing personal and collective mythologies.

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<sup>587</sup> See Hardwick (2010) 360, on how non-verbal elements in a translation can illuminate the original text's dialectic with audience expectations that are specific to the original cultural context.

It has become obvious to practitioners, theatre goers and critics that the new financial realities dictate a different scale of productions of Greek drama, but at the same time a new production ethic that is more egalitarian and considered by the creators more 'essential'. In the case of contemporary Greece, such productions proved that they can be 'Epidaurus material', despite their small scale, introducing an experimental theatre aesthetic to the most mainstream (and culturally significant) theatrical event of the year.

The genre of tragedy continues to be crucial in Greek national self-definition. At this historical juncture, the search of identity continues through the demolition of previous historical and cultural certainties in the face of national and global crisis. This transitional period provides opportunity for renewed attitudes towards the chorus. The search of 'who we are' continues, as well as the exploration of folk roots, but the relationship between past and present is viewed differently. The relationship to the classics has gone through a process of demystification, and so has the relationship to the national past. The chorus, as a collective presence, or as an echo of a collective presence, or as the opposite of the individual hero, continues to be instrumental in this exploration.

In terms of form, the 21<sup>st</sup>-century chorus is rarely a large collective in the periphery of the action, mostly concerned with music and dance. The ironic distance from such modes of expression for young people, due to, among other things, the 'heavy' performance history of tragedy in contemporary Greece, creates awkwardness with regard to the singing and dancing. As revivals of Greek tragedy become increasingly open to other disciplines, influenced by the openness of performance art, other methods become available for the movement of the chorus. The legacy of directors like Terzopoulos has opened up the possibility of exploring traditional theatre forms from other cultures in the choreography and movement, while a company like Horos has developed a distinctive physical language combining tradition and innovation that has proved to be very appropriate for tragedy. Even a three-person chorus can open up the expressive canvas of a performance: in the case of the highly-stylized *Carnage*, the formal elements of music and dance can be replaced by the techniques of the theatre of image and references to cinema, while in the case of the 2014 *Helen*, physical theatre is the shared code. In all these cases, multiple non-realistic worlds and non-verbal metaphors can find their way into the dramaturgy through the chorus.

Furthermore, we saw that old hierarchies in production need to be re-addressed. The choral form, as a large group of young actors who dance and sing well, get paid less, are fresh out of drama school, and remain largely disconnected from the protagonists

during the rehearsal process, is not pertinent, exigent, or exciting anymore. In the global social and economic crisis, the presence of a collective, when it is possible, takes a whole new meaning and has a huge potential.

In terms of meaning, the chorus may find a variety of ways to remain essential, in a completely different production structure and budget. Its dramatic identity and authority become fluid, and reflect even more strongly the overriding social message of the production. For example, the tragicomic elements so widely employed are a political comment themselves: although in a genre surrounded by notions of holiness and rootedness the use of irony and tragicomedy is sure to cause some negative reactions,<sup>588</sup> it is, when done thoughtfully, a sign of both aesthetic and political maturity, of audiences and artists: ‘in an age of doubt, simplicity is hardly admissible; there may be no blatant preaching, and the sermon must be muffled.’<sup>589</sup> The younger generation is acutely aware of the irony in the relationship between the audience and the play during performances of Greek drama in modern Greece today. It is irony that emerges from the workings of synecdoche and self-reference that necessarily accompany the performance of tragic drama in that country, due to the genre’s cultural baggage. This irony may be enhanced by the directorial concept, through juxtaposition of incongruous tonalities. Like genre-defying contemporary playwrights, new generation directors of Greek drama do not seek to elicit a unified response from all audience members, but rather to divide and confuse them, cultivating a feeling of uncertainty.<sup>590</sup>

Thus, in this era of doubt, the chorus hardly ever preach or make authoritative philosophical statements. Furthermore, their comments are often meta-theatrically framed, or have a directness that penetrates the fourth wall.

As a collective presence, the chorus may be the actual ensemble from which the story and the characters emerge, symbolically representing the entire artistic team or even an entire generation: the power of the collective is still there, but its identity has shifted. Since the individual tragic hero has been deconstructed or undermined, where is the (quintessential for tragedy) juxtaposition between collective and individual to be found? Perhaps in the contrast between the new generation—emphasized as we have seen by the ‘children-playing’ or ‘schoolchildren’ metaphors—and the old and ‘sacred’ form of

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<sup>588</sup> In the case of Karantzas’ *Helen*, even generally positive reviews had reservations about what they saw the ‘mocking’ of the characters (Kleftoyianni, 2014), while others are completely against what they saw as simply a shallow and uniformed ‘parody’ of tragedy (Polenakis, 2014).

<sup>589</sup> Styan (1962) 293.

<sup>590</sup> Styan (1962) 255-58.

tragedy. Thus the collective presence becomes a metaphor for young people's re-thinking and re-learning a genre which had been a fundamental part of their education as a pillar of collective self-definition. The young 'chorus' stands in opposition to the play itself, re-examining it with a light, childish, innocent-looking touch. Or perhaps we are meant to locate the contrast between the new generation of artists, who are experiencing extreme disillusionment, and the collective of the audience, in the case of Epidaurus the biggest audience of the year. People from all over the country flock every year to the ancient theatre with certain expectations: but 'we', these young creators seem to say, 'are here to challenge them.' Or perhaps the implied contrast is between the new generation of performers, who had so far only been cast in the chorus, and the older generation of venerated 'star' performers who have shaped contemporary tradition of tragedy, especially in the framework of this festival, and have often been lauded for their technique, i.e. their ability to fill the space and to embody the grand tragic presence. By using a very different theatrical code and technique, the chorus of young performers, who can never hope to enjoy the economic privileges of the previous generation, is 'appropriating' the tragic form, for their own means, aesthetic and ideology. This stance may bring to mind post-colonial contexts of revival, in which an oppressed culture appropriates the high art of tragedy, heretofore reserved for the oppressive class.<sup>591</sup> In the case of a pessimistic reading of the play, the chorus is not a benign force or a logical voice in juxtaposition with a hubristic tragic hero, but instead reveals the underlying message of disappointment by misguided collective decisions and institutionally-sanctioned injustice. In the current socio-political context the chorus simply as a representation of 'the people', i.e. the community of all citizens, the representatives of a national body united by common goals and identity, or sharing an ethnic background that binds them together through pride or nostalgia, is rarely a viable option: in today's political theatre, when the production goal may be to provoke the audience into becoming socially engaged, comforting notions of the unity of the collective are challenged.

The importance of the work of the younger generation of creators at this moment lies in the fact that, against the backdrop of calamity, they feel that theatre should not be a commodity, but needs to continue to be an essential part of public political discourse and the rebuilding of a shattered sense of community. Perhaps this era of transition will mark the end of the dancing and singing chorus as we know it. At the same time, this

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<sup>591</sup> See chapter 4 of this thesis.



creative engagement with the form and content of tragedy by the new generation of artists also proves, once more, the chorus' endless theatrical and political potential.

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION

#### **The chorus: a solution to the tragic genre's alterity**

In my examination of both the ancient evidence as well as significant contemporary directorial contributions I supported the argument for the evolving nature of the choral form (and of tragedy in general) and the importance of cultural and socio-political relevance for the success of the chorus: this is a form that inherently carries the potential to interact profoundly with cultural structures and idiosyncrasies and can, when used successfully, be theatrically and ideologically exciting in any contemporary re-contextualisation. But it is precisely this inherent ability/dynamic to activate the theatre's relationship to its cultural framework and its suitability as a form to carry projected cultural traits which can enable it to offer a solution to the problem of the tragic genre's alterity. This alterity can be a problem as well as an opportunity, and nowhere is this more obvious than in the discussion of the chorus.

The alterity of tragedy is something quite unique in our current theatre tradition. It is useful, even crucial for some theatre practitioners, directors, composers, choreographers, to be able to engage with elements of past performance traditions, forms and modes of expression, when creating a new work, whether that work is based on the canonized "classics" or not; when that work comes from the period before modernity and its main mode of expression is not realistic, when that work's scope demands an engagement with a variety of art forms and disciplines, the need is more pressing and the existence of a cultural framework, independent of the dramatic text, that contains such elements is even more comforting: it is at least a starting point. Whether with reverent or subversive mood, this relationship with the past, based on shared codes, creates more avenues for the communication of meaning to the audience, and creates a sense of community for everyone present. It can even validate the so-called 'message' of the art work by placing it within a recognizable tradition. An entire system of cultural factors and modes of expression is available to the artist in order to create a new work that can easily find its place within the historical trajectory of aesthetics, politics and culture.

But with Greek tragedy, that most loved, internationally popular and revered genre, we have to invent everything from the beginning and that is a very distinctive characteristic which sets it apart from other theatre forms: the blank canvas can be daunting at the beginning of conceptualization of a new production. The discussion on

the chorus has revealed how crucial this relationship with a pre-existing artistic or cultural framework is. We have seen how directors all over the world have tried to harness traditional cultures, religious customs—a variety of ethnographic elements—in order to find ways to express the chorus and to replicate the connotations and added layers of meaning available to the original creators and the original audience. This discussion has shown how this need to have a cultural framework has led to a process of invention of tradition, with socio-political significance. It has also shown that the theatrical expression of the forces that shape our political lives, is another way to express cultural context in the absence of an uninterrupted theatrical tradition.

### **The chorus: a means to reactivate theatre's social role**

The evolution of tragedy revivals and the many and diverse contemporary incarnations of the chorus have consistently proven theatre's social role for now and for the future: the Greek chorus is a vital presence in the dramatization of diachronic political and humanist issues. Far from being a problem, the contemporary Greek chorus emerges as a force for aesthetic innovation and socio-political relevance. Furthermore, my investigation has led me to propose that currently, in the context of a global economic and social crisis, there is a very perceptible shift in the aesthetics and politics of the staging of Greek drama, that has had a great impact on the staging of the chorus.

The chorus can provide solutions for the current crisis of identity and apolitical art in a globalized world in which we as citizens feel increasingly deprived of control or influence.

Furthermore, the exploration of the choral form in a contemporary context for contemporary theatre can be a way of reconnecting with traditional elements in new ways, elements that have been part of the arsenal of theatre and performance for centuries, and which anthropologists have argued have a critical role in our societies such as the collective voice, the importance of ritual, the expression through music and dance. At the same time, the engagement with Greek tragedy and in particular the collective of the chorus has the potential to lead us to a thoughtful, in-depth examination of roots and identity.

### **The chorus: a solution for creativity and aesthetic renewal**

The formal elements that made tragedy so popular in antiquity no longer have the same impact on a contemporary audience. For the original audience conventions such as scenography, impersonation and the continuous plot were revolutionary and stunning. The chorus was the only element that was familiar to them from before Attic drama was invented. Drama for the first time gave to the audience gods, mythical kings and ordinary people as characters, the forward-moving action almost as a virtual reality, even violence in real time (even though it was narrated shortly after it happened). Today we have an audience intimately familiar with the tricks and methods of performance, an audience that has been exposed to all kinds of narrative, through visual imagery that is extremely advanced, in great works of art in cinema and theatre. So one of the things we can offer them that comes close to the uniqueness and theatrical power that characterized tragedy originally is our own re-imagining of the chorus. In the productions discussed in this thesis we have seen this form's ability to be each time unique, topical, imaginative, surprising, and beautiful. It also has been frequently and imaginatively used as a basic tool of the *mise-en-scene* for breaking restrictive moulds and conventions, and pushing the boundaries of even familiar techniques, such as for example the degree of interaction between audience and performers.

### **The chorus: a means towards theatrical immediacy and authenticity**

The productions chosen for analysis in this thesis due to their 'exemplary' approach to the chorus all share authenticity in terms of the relationship with the audience. And as such they fit Gamel's definition of 'inductive' authenticity,<sup>592</sup> defined as the ability to provoke critical and emotional responses in the audience that are similar to those provoked by the original production. Furthermore, these productions not only came close to re-creating the impact of the original, but also illuminated aspects of our own world. Thus they are examples of what Sidiropoulou defines as a successful recontextualization of an ancient text, which through 'a thoughtful exchange between the play's original circumstances and a context that can be gradually acknowledged and processed by

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<sup>592</sup> See Chapter 6, p.213.

spectators today... furnishes valuable insights for the understanding of both the play and the world we live in'.<sup>593</sup>

The chorus, whether as a means to activate collective memory, as an incarnation of contemporary political forces or as a collective representation of the human condition in juxtaposition to the isolated hero, was crucial in each production for making the play urgent, topical and authentic.

### Concluding remarks

I began this thesis by considering contemporary solutions to the various characteristics and functions of the original chorus. I feel that my investigation has led me to the conclusion that a successful contemporary chorus is not necessarily one that finds corresponding 'solutions' to each one of the original aspects. A successful chorus is not necessarily a large one, comprising of fifteen or fifty people, nor is it necessarily in full dancing-and-singing mode. A successful chorus is not necessarily the 'successful' chorus of modern Greek tradition at the Epidaurus festival any more, or in any other big-budget festival, nor is it a drilled, technically proficient chorus. It doesn't necessarily include all the modes of expression of the original chorus, such as song, speech, act-dividing song, and shared lyric passages with actors.

Instead it is a chorus that moves us, by being dramaturgically significant and emotionally resonant. It is chorus which attempts to revive dynamic aspects of the ancient form that have ramifications in the political dimensions of the piece, and/or its cultural significance. Music and dance *can* be part of that, and so can large numbers and a powerful collective presence. But a subversive, unexpected staging of the chorus today, that has an essential relationship with the chorus' original function and role, can be as 'successful' as the full dancing and singing chorus of Mnouchkine's *Les Atrides*, even if it consists of one person. Characteristics of the original form, such as the beauty and complexity of the poetry, have to be weighed against an essential, deep connection to a contemporary audience, which would require extensive modifications: a departure from the original form can mean a re-activation of the original content.

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<sup>593</sup> Sidiropoulou (2014a) 15.

Authenticity in the relationship with the audience can take many forms and is totally dependent upon context. For example, today, in the era of global economic crisis, a multi-person, expensive-looking, rigorously drilled chorus may not be the most relevant incarnation in order to get the audience thinking about current social problems. Instead, a tragic revival that reaffirms theatre's political role and attempts to have an essential critique of the status quo will conceive of its chorus accordingly, and perhaps may eliminate the chorus altogether. On the other hand, a chorus of citizens, such as those created by Claudia Bosse or that of the recent *Suppliants* at the Edinburgh Lyceum only has authenticity as an experiment of applied democracy and active citizenship. It also raises ethical questions related to the employment of actors, especially since the acting profession is perennially, but today especially, under great economic pressure. As we saw in Chapter 6, the chorus is connected to a variety of problems related to the ethics of production. That is not to say that a contemporary chorus cannot have an aesthetic value, with beautiful costumes, music and movement: music after all is a great dramaturgical tool, one of the most direct modes of expression in theatre and a cultural signifier that activates memory, emotion and collectivity. Theatre has always been an arena for the convergence of many arts, visual, dramatic, musical. It is also a form that, as we saw, can have a fruitful relationship with traditional cultures and folk roots.

The original chorus was itself a convention in the 5<sup>th</sup> century in a form that evolved over many decades. Thus, even though the tragedians didn't have to face the contemporary problems of funding and 'otherness', they likely faced the same problems of staleness, repetition and irrelevance that directors face today. A starting point for the investigation of the chorus in this thesis was the principle that tragedy was an experimental, evolving form. As I reach my conclusion, having considered the impetus behind contemporary directorial approaches over several crucial decades, it becomes even clearer to me that the variations and changes in the treatment of the chorus by the original playwrights may have been due to their own need to avoid the usual and cliché, and to keep the theatrical experience vital and relevant in the course of a turbulent century.

## APPENDIX

**Interview Transcript:**

**Simos Kakalas. 2016. *On the occasion of the performance of Euripides' Orestes by Horos theatre company*. Interviewed by Magdalena Zira. [audio recording] Limassol, Cyprus, 9<sup>th</sup> of May 2016.**

**Is the performance that we watched yesterday the third version of the production?**

Yes, it is the third and final version, with elements from the two first drafts.

**How did it begin? How did it evolve?**

It started from an indoor space, in which everything we owned, everything we had acquired as a theatre company over ten years was on stage: a chaotic and complex set which included trash, stairs, lights, chandeliers, sodas, stuffed animals, pipes etc. Out of this rubble came the props we used in the performance. Because the house of Atreus was 'moving house', was falling apart, and so were we, because *Orestes* was our conclusion. From the beginning, when I started the company my goal, which I told anyone that joined the group, was to produce *Golfo*, *Erophili* and *Orestes*. This triptych is a theoretical reflection on a supposed axis of Greek tradition—it is *supposed* because there are great [historical] gaps in Greek civilization. There were long periods in Greece when there was no theatre. In Europe there was *commedia dell'arte*, religious drama, but we don't know whether in Greece there was similar theatre culture during that time.

**When was the decision taken to create this triptych?**

In 2003. I began thinking about the iambic decapentasyllabic verse in *Golfo* and *Erophili*. My work on Cretan literature began from the narrative poem *Apokopos* by Bergadis (16<sup>th</sup> century), which was a transitional piece that I used in order to invent some exercises for the actors in order to 'unlock' the decapentasyllabic verse. We worked extensively with Natalia Deligiannaki, a philologist and researcher of Cretan literature, on the decapentasyllabic verse, on pronunciation and dialect, for a period of five months. I created exercises on the rhythmical motif of the iambic decapentasyllabic, I showed them first to Natalia to get her approval. So our approach began with the study of the rhythm and the interpretation of the text came afterwards. I am troubled by what we usually do with the decapentasyllabic in the theatre: everyone breaks the metre, what the poet has

constructed is violated so that the audience can understand the meaning of the text. But in my opinion such performances are incomprehensible. I can't understand anything. Because the poet has enclosed the meaning in the decapentasyllabic verse. If you change it, you demolish the whole structure. This has always seemed strange to me, even when I was in drama school. And later, when I acquired some knowledge, it began to seem absurd. And of course Natalia Deligiannaki helped me by confirming my instinct that this is a wrong way. It is self-evident that if someone has written a page in iambic decapentasyllabic verse, starting the sentence at the beginning and putting a full stop at the end, it is for a reason. When in *Erophili* Death says

*τσ'άγριαις καρδιαίς καταπονώ, τση λογισμούς αλλάσσω,  
(I make cruel hearts softer, I change people's minds)*

You can't break up that line. Or when he says:

*Η άγρια κ'η ανελύπητη κ'η σκοτεινή θωριά μου  
και το δραπάν'όπου βαστώ, και τούτα τα γυμνά μου  
κόκκαλα,*

(My cruel and pitiless and dark countenance,  
the scythe I hold in my hand and these my naked  
bones)

There is a reason the word *bones* is on the next line. I thought: where is the decapentasyllabic verse still alive? In Crete. People still write *mantinades*<sup>594</sup> there, they still communicate through the decapentasyllabic verse, this metre is not a museum piece in Crete, it is a living tradition. People from 5 to 95 years old call the radio to tell their *mantinades*. So I went there to learn this metre: how it is delivered, how they have long and short vowels, how they deal with caesuras. If the verse was meant to be broken, then the poet would not have written a verse! I believe that skilled poets manage to encompass the meaning in a decapentasyllabic verse. In contemporary culture we despise technique because it is hard, because we don't want to have to make so much effort. We want to learn something fast. But in essence we end up learning nothing. This is why [with my

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<sup>594</sup> *Mantinada* is a rhyming couplet or a quatrain in decapentasyllabic verse, a form of folk oral poetry most usually found in Crete but also in other islands of Greece.



company] we work in this way, we want to go against this tendency of superficiality and confusion. People ask me ‘why do you return to the same play again and again?’ I reply, because you can’t work on something for a month and then throw it away. I can’t work on *Erophili* for a month! And so from Golfo, an amazing melodrama written in a decapentasyllabic verse that is slightly free, I went to *Apokopos* by Bergadis, a 558-verse poem consisting of strict, clean decapentasyllabic rhyming couplets, with only one enjambment in the entire piece, in order to develop our technique. And only then I attempted *Erophili*, which is a very hard text, with many enjambments, such as the one I mentioned above. Enjambment is difficult in its delivery, we had to find the way. The play is a masterpiece, it is technically superb, there isn’t one hiatus, there isn’t one weakness, it is a triumph of technique and artistry. And then finally I came to Tsarouchis, who translates tragedy in prose. He is very different from translators of the past, who have achieved amazing results and experimented in reviving the feeling of tragic poetry and metre. Tsarouchis goes a step further, he feels that perhaps we shouldn’t care if tragedy was written in verse, since ancient sound is lost for ever, like most formal elements of ancient Greek drama. We know next to nothing about how tragedy was staged. And it is really funny that most people think that we do, when all the while this ‘tradition’ is based on speculations from the 1930s, imported from Germany.

**Perhaps our educational system is to blame for this misconception.**

At school we are taught in a very simplistic approach. Everything is black and white. For example, we are not taught the decline of the classical Athenian civilization, only its peak. But from studying decline one can really learn something. Only ancient Greek drama teaches the decline of the Athenian state. For example, *Orestes* is about the decline of the Athenian democratic system, about the ecclesia being controlled by those who can shout the loudest. So whoever can promise the biggest lies can become prime minister! This is what Euripides teaches us. And so we come to *Orestes*. After the first performance indoors, the next version was for Epidauros. We are really lucky to have performed at Epidauros. It was very daring of Loukos [to adopt this policy], because otherwise theatre companies such as mine would never have been allowed in that theatre. Perhaps now that his term has ended the festival will become commercial again, featuring mostly TV stars. At Epidauros the performance had to focus on the spoken text. We chose a very minimal set, and in any case we didn’t have the budget to create something that could fill that space. And so we came up with these big puppets, that were like dead bodies strewn all

over the orchestra. It was the time when we kept seeing dead bodies of people washed up on beaches. These puppets are the bodies, the bodies that today are everywhere we look. And so I wanted these bodies to reach the orchestra of Epidaurus. The tragic heroes moved around among these bodies. From our initial set design, the only thing that remained was a sofa, the rug which Clytemnestra used to kill Agamemnon and a painting of a sailor by Tsarouchis. In the final version of the performance we included a zeimbekiko dance performed by a sailor, which was also a reference to Tsarouchis, who loved zeimbekiko. The Greek coffee making is also a reference to Tsarouchis: he loved folk culture, things like making coffee in a small kitchen, coffee divination. He also loved Karagiozis shadow theatre, and worked hard to shake off from Karagiozis the stigma of 'bad popular theatre'. When he was young he used to take shadow puppeteer Sotiris Spatharis (the father of famous Eugenios Spatharis) and go to the houses of big bourgeois families. He would then do a presentation about Karagiozis and then Spatharis would perform a shadow play. In this way gradually he was able to change the bourgeoisie's prejudice against Karagiozis. Tsarouchis viewed Karagiozis as authentic folk theatre. He would often say that there are new plays being written in Greece, we do have a living theatre tradition in Greece, it is called Karagiozis. Because the puppeteers used to write their own plays back then. So all these elements that found their way into their final version of *Orestes*, such as the zeimbekiko dance and the coffee divination, derive from our research on Tsarouchis. Because Tsarouchis showed us a way which we unfortunately didn't pay enough heed to. In the same way that we didn't pay the proper attention to Koun, Nikos Gatsos<sup>595</sup> and Photis Kontoglou.<sup>596</sup> Folk tradition is very important. When we are cut off from our own folk tradition in contemporary we art, we end up copying foreign, imported trends and movements, without any thought and without looking for true substance.

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<sup>595</sup> Nikos Gatsos (1911-1992) was a Greek poet, translator of drama, prose and poetry and lyricist, most famous for writing the lyrics for songs by composers Manos Hatzidakis and Mikis Theodorakis and for his translations of Lorca's poetry and drama, most notably Lorca's *Blood Wedding* for Teatro Technis, directed by Karolos Koun (1948).

<sup>596</sup> Photis Kontoglou (1895-1965) was an influential Greek author and painter, whose students include Yiannis Tsarouchis and Nicos Eggonopoulos. He sought authenticity in Greek identity through his work, he researched and was inspired by folk traditions and he wrote in demotic Greek. He also contributed significantly to Byzantine iconography.

**Tell us more about your company.**

Elena Mavridou, Dimitra Kouza and I are the nucleus of the company. We've been together since 2003, and we also share administrative duties. It's really important to be a team. Because if two actors know the theatre code that we use, then we can easily include two more actors in a production. Our common code is mask work and physical theatre. Mask of course makes physical theatre necessary. Often in Greek drama revivals we see productions using masks simply as a design element, that does not influence the acting code—people just wear a mask and walk around the stage. But this is wrong. The mask demands a different physicality. I discovered the way to mask work through my own work and through attending seminars, such as for example on the Jacques Lecoq method, and through doing my own research. I invented some exercises that we tested with the company. Our masks are made by Martha Foka and they are created especially for the performance. Drafts are made for each character, then some clay mock-ups and then after a lot of re-workings they take their final form. The masks used in the production of *Orestes* do not belong to a specific style. After several years of work with Martha Foka on masks something very idiosyncratic was created. They are based on animals, like the masks of commedia dell'arte. For example, the Messenger is a turtle, Menelaus is a frog, Orestes, Pylades and Electra are big cats. In combination with the particular gestus of each one, taken from a recognizeably Greek canvas, they bring to mind people you see around you every day. Pylades for example was an angry young man ready to burn everything around him, Electra was a girl who is a little bit of a goth, a little emo, very reserved, who one day explodes and lashes out. We worked very hard on the gestures, aiming at detail and precision. It is challenging for the actors, because it is like a score. What I've always looked for in my work is precision and discipline on stage, combined with a sense of freedom and improvisation; this was a balance that very hard to achieve and find the right 'tools' for. The result needed to look 'free' when it wasn't.

**How long did you rehearse for the first version of *Orestes*?**

Because we have a shared code, we only rehearsed the first *Orestes* for a month, but that was preceded by four months of directorial preparation. For the second version of *Orestes* we rehearsed for month and a half. And then in one week of rehearsals we created the third and final version. These days I am able to work fast because we've been together

for ten years. The first version of *Golfo* took a year and half of work, because that was the time when we were inventing our tools, our method, so there was much searching and experimenting. I had begun from a more Eastern approach, having worked on the Suzuki method, and with [directors] Terzopoulos and Marmarinos, as part of my training. But when I found my own method, I began to work faster. At the same time, nowadays one can't afford a long rehearsal period. I felt a pressing need to find a very specific language for the stage which I would be able to apply quickly. This means the director has to do a lot of preparation and needs to be ready at the first rehearsal. When I am researching something new, I feel I never have enough time.

**Yesterday you addressed the audience before the performance and you also intervened through the sound system at one point. Do you always deliver a 'prologue' before your performances?**

No, not always. Yesterday I addressed the audience because I was thinking about the question 'Why ancient Greek drama' that was the general theme of this festival.<sup>597</sup> And because we also wonder 'why ancient Greek drama' and because the audience are part of a conversation on this subject. As for my intervention during the performance, when I shouted 'Euripides you bastard!', this happens every time because it is in Tsarouchis' translation.

**How important is interaction with the audience? Does the audience work as a catalyst in how a performance develops and evolves?**

Always. From the beginning, from when I was in drama school, I was thinking about the separation between the actors and the audience. Why are they there and we are here, and why don't they touch us if we are next them, and if I am alive why can't I touch a spectator? Because *Golfo* started by touring the countryside and provincial towns and I was the MC, I would perform a prologue before each performance and in this way I had the opportunity to build a relationship with the audience. In the country the audience talk to us much more easily. For example, one day we were performing on a beach and one guy shouted at us 'Get it over with, it's going to rain.' And then I looked at the clouds gathering and I said 'Let's get moving, what the gentleman said.' Or spectators would get

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<sup>597</sup> The performance of *Orestes* discussed here was presented in the Small Festival of Ancient Greek Drama (Μικρό Φεστιβάλ Αρχαίου Δράματος) in 2016 in Limassol, Cyprus, at Rialto Theatre.

up, come up to you and talk to you, or they go away and come back. I found this experience enchanting. Because my background was the National Theatre of Northern Greece, where you had your dresser, your prompter, your technician, your dressing room with a shower, and suddenly in the travelling troupe there was none of that: it was all about finding creative ways to put up our set, dealing with unpredictable weather, sometimes performing without a set, and realizing that without all these [luxuries] you can still make theatre, but without an actor and without the relationship with the audience you can't. Theatre *is* this relationship. And this is how we started establishing this code, this interaction, supported by the idea that there is always a way to reach the audience. The experience in the countryside introduced these new ideas.

**In your *Orestes* the choral passages are drastically reduced. Is this a practical/financial issue?**

Yes, but also it is a play chosen for this reason: it has the peculiarity of having short choral passages. It's as if Euripides wants to get rid of the chorus, throws it in a corner and gives it five lines. Of course I cut the choral passages even further. In the performance Dimitra Kouza delivers the chorus' lines, like a commentary on the action.

**What is the chorus' identity?**

They are friends of Electra. Sometimes it's as if they are as one with her. But Euripides is a bit awkward with the chorus here, reducing it significantly. It's as if he keeps the chorus only because it is a tradition, a convention.

**Isn't that a political issue too?**

Yes, exactly, because the chorus' power has been reduced, and thus there is this awkwardness. The ecclesia has lost its power, the demagogues are in control. This is a play that is with one foot in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It could have been written yesterday by someone who is experimenting with tragedy. It is so contemporary that you ask yourself 'Is it possible?' And yet it is. Euripides experimented, broke forms, created new ones. He is an amazing revolutionary. And Tsarouchis' translation works like that, on a second level. It makes the play even more contemporary.

**The chorus has always had a powerful political and social dimension. Do you think that today this interaction with the audience that you talk about can activate this dimension?**

Maybe. Perhaps tragedy in this way can find a new direction. I've always wondered what would happen if I made the audience the chorus of the performance. This was the idea behind the first version of *Orestes*. Can the audience participate? At various points we would stop the performance to have a dialogue with the audience. I played Pylades in the first version of *Orestes*. For example, when Orestes and Pylades left to go to the assembly for the trial, we would leave the stage through the audience. And it was during the time of the negotiations with the European Union, with Varoufakis and the memorandum, and we would stop in the middle of the audience seating area and we would say to them 'now we are going to the negotiations, now we are going to play our final card' and they would be rolling with laughter. Or we would ask the audience 'Do you know who Tantalus was?' and most of the time they would answer. So I tried to keep this element [of interaction] alive.

**Do you think theatre can help one become an active citizen?**

Normally yes. If it doesn't bore you, yes, it helps you become an active citizen. Because it is a relationship that is being developed. The heart of the matter is this empty space between the audience and the performers. In that space this silent dialogue develops. The spectator doesn't just sit there and passively take what you throw at them. It stimulates thought and a critical attitude. It is not like a politician making empty promises with his fans saying 'yes, yes, we support you because you make the most promises'. Theatre doesn't make any promises.

**Do you think you'll direct Greek drama again?**

Yes, I would love to. I'd love to do *Trojan Women*, in Tsarouchis' translation again. But I am not interested in doing something in any other translation.

**What about in a new translation?**

Yes, if there was a new translation, in which we could develop what Tsarouchis does, which is not to try to do 'ancient theatre' but to try to speak about the here and now, in contemporary terms.

**So language is very important for you.**

Yes, because you see contemporary revivals of tragedy and there is a distance, because of this language that tries to imitate the stylized language of tragedy without essentially understanding it. In Japanese No theatre there is extreme/excessive/much strong stylization of the representation of human behaviour, through mask, tempo, metre and music. I believe that ancient Greek theatre was something similar to that, i.e. a stylized form. Because you see these elements also in Balinese drama. For example, tragic drama in theatre traditions around the world is played in a slow tempo, with waits, with long pauses. There is a weight you have to carry and that can be done only through a slow tempo. Like in funerals. You can't go to funeral in an allegro tempo. It doesn't mean that we don't release some tension through laughter. That's why there is comic relief in tragedy, even Aeschylus has a sense of humour. Precisely because the subject matter is so heavy, you can't present it without some moments of relief. I often hear people say 'tragedy has a heavy subject matter'. It is not heavy, it is just presented in a boring manner. The plays themselves contain elements of humour. The Phrygian in *Orestes* for example is a moment of pure comic relief. And Euripides, that amazing virtuoso, introduces the Phrygian at the peak of dramatic tension.

**Are we perhaps at a turning point when we can begin to rid ourselves from prejudices about how Attic drama 'should be done'?**

I wish we will be able to be rid of these prejudices and see everything through a new lens. I like clichés, they are wonderful, but you have to know how to use them. You can't just repeat them. You can serve reheated food to the audience. Tragedy is not a microwave meal! You have to use fresh ingredients!

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